DECEMBER

ZANE GREY
WESTERN MAGAZINE

LARAMIE NELSON
RIDES AGAIN

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CANYON

NEW... and COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

The Quick Shooting Action Sequel to

ZANE GREY'S RAIDERS OF SPANISH PEAKS

The Open Trail

THERE IS ONE THING about every book—at least one you have liked a lot—that is always a little disappointing; those two last words, "The End." No matter how satisfying the climax, no matter how well things have worked out for the people you have come to know as friends—that's it, so long, no more. And if you are like I am, you always wonder what happened next.

But, for many of Zane Grey's most vivid characters, there is only one book—at the most, two or three. And, along with millions of readers, Zane Grey's son, Romer Grey, has speculated about "what ever happened to" Buck Duane, Jim Lacy, Arizona Ames, and all the other strong characters his father chronicled. Not content just to wonder, Romer Grey has done something about it: written a series of sequels to Zane Grey's most famous novels—and now *you* can learn of the further futures of these great western heroes.

For instance, when you finished *"Raiders of Spanish Peaks,"* one of Zane Grey's greatest novels, enjoyed by millions, you must have wondered would Laramie Nelson marry Hallie Lindsay and become a rancher? Would he take on that job with the cattlemen's association, maybe turn into one of those "cattle barons?"

Well, those questions are answered now. Just turn to the beginning of "The Other Side of the Canyon" in this issue of *Zane Grey Western Magazine,* and find out what's in store for Laramie Nelson!.

Next month, for the first 1970 adventure of one of your Zane Grey favorites, Romer Grey has spun a tense yarn of a grim manhunt in the old West—and the hunter is Nevada Jim Lacy, that immortal hero whose exploits have sold millions of copies of the outstanding novel, *"Nevada."*

Every month, Zane Grey's heroes ride again in brand-new novels —for them, in *Zane Grey Western Magazine,* the trail to adventure is still open!

LEO MARGULIES
Publisher

DECEMBER, 1969
VOL. 1, NO. 3

ZANE GREY WESTERN MAGAZINE

NEW LARAMIE NELSON WESTERN NOVEL

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CANYON

by ROMER ZANE GREY

Three men and a woman against a vicious outlaw gang . . . a vengeful widow, an eastern dude, a lawman with a yellow streak—and Laramie Nelson! The trail was long, but no longer than the odds against them—until Laramie had an inspiration that gave his strange band a deadly advantage!

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THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CANYON

Nelson's own bullet felled the man he'd come to help. Now there was only one thing to do—ride out on a suicidal mission of vengeance with the woman his rifle had made a widow!

by ROMER ZANE GREY

An Explosive Sequel to

RAIDERS OF SPANISH PEAKS

LARAMIE NELSON topped a small rise in the road and drew his horse up, letting him blow. He eased one foot out of the stirrup and hooked a leg over the saddle-horn while he rolled a cigarette.

It was mid-afternoon of a July Kansas day, hot and dusty, and he'd ridden west out of Dodge at dawn, his destination a small town a few miles up ahead. He was saddle-sore and had strong misgivings about what he would find waiting for him ahead.

Laramie was tall, slim, sandy-haired. His lean face was lightly dusted with freckles, and in repose had a melancholy cast, his smile a rare and sudden thing. His eyes, slightly squinted from years under the glare of the sun, were gray. His clothes showed much wear. Even his gun belt, slung low on his right thigh, was worn, the holster shiny with use. Only the long spurs on his dusty

A SUPERB WESTERN NOVEL

Based on the Unforgettable Character

LARAMIE NELSON

Created By

ZANE GREY

boots glinted, winking like silver in the sun.

Now he cocked his head as a train hooted mournfully almost two miles distant. He knew the tracks ran parallel to the road a mile to the north. Wingfoot snorted and pawed the ground, dust puffing up like smoke signals.

"All right, hoss, all right." Laramie swatted the horse affectionately. "Since you're so anxious, let's ramble on."

Wingfoot moved out at an easy lope. Although the area was in the grip of a long drought, it was pretty country, cattle country, flat plains with a few gentle hills folding back into the blue distance. The open grassland was dotted with clumps of trees. Cattle stood in clusters under the trees, heads drooping listlessly in the still heat.

Suddenly the silence was broken by rapid gunfire off to the right. Then the train whistled again, an angry blast, followed by the screeching sound of tortured metal as the train ground to a halt.

Laramie heard more shots, scattered now. Without hesitation he turned Wingfoot with his knee and touched spurs gently to his flanks. Within seconds Wingfoot was running flat out, Laramie leaning forward, urging him on. He unslung his Winchester and held it ready.

Wingfoot burst out of a grove of trees about two hundred yards from the stalled train. About a dozen horses were gathered at the mail car, which was open. Several of the horses were riderless. But even as Laramie rode pell-mell toward the train, five men boiled out of the mail car, forked their horses, and the bandit crew rode off at a fast gallop, traveling away from Laramie. One rider trailed several yards behind the others. All wore masks.

Aside from the fact that Wingfoot was already winded and hadn't a prayer of catching fresh horses, what chance did one man have against a dozen armed and ruthless train robbers?

Laramie reined Wingfoot in. As his mount came to a ploughing, stiff-legged halt, Laramie stood up in the stirrups and aimed his Winchester at the lagging rider. He followed the man in his sights for a moment, then squeezed the trigger. For a moment he thought he had missed.

Then the rider threw up his hands and tumbled into the dust, his horse racing on. Now one of the bandits turned and rode back. He rode in a strange way, back bent, neck crooked up like a hovering buzzard. Laramie figured he intended carrying the wounded man off on his horse. Instead he reined in above the fallen man, drew his gun and took deliberate aim. He fired twice, then sent his horse scampering after the others.

Laramie kneed Wingfoot into life and pounded toward the train. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a small man in Eastern clothes hop down out of the mail car and began firing after the fleeing bandits. But

"The Other Side of the Canyon" marks the return to print of one of Zane Grey's strongest creations, Laramie Nelson. As the numberless readers of RAIDERS OF SPANISH PEAKS, the novel which introduced Laramie Nelson, will recall, Laramie was a seasoned Indian fighter as a boy—an incomparable tracker and trailer—expert in every kind of range work—and one of the deadliest men with a gun the West ever knew. As foreman of the Spanish Peaks Ranch, he saved the Lindsay family from ruin, and appeared to have stilled his restless spirit with his love for Hallie Lindsay and a respected position in the community. But Laramie Nelson is not a man for any kind of halter—which is why we find him now, riding alone. . . .

This is the first of a series of new adventures of Laramie Nelson, written by Romer Zane Grey, son of Laramie's creator. Watch for them—and for new stories featuring other famous Zane Grey characters—in ZANE GREY WESTERN MAGAZINE.

THE EDITORS

they were already out of pistol range.

At the fallen train robber, Laramie pulled Wingfoot in and left the saddle, landing on his feet like a cat, rifle muzzle centered on the prone man's chest. The bandit's bandana mask had fallen off.

The uncovered face was lean, gaunt. A weak mouth spoiled darkly handsome features.

Laramie grunted and dropped to one knee. "Ned! Ned Cooper!"

The man's eyes fluttered open. A startled look swept his face. "Laramie!" A faint smile moved like a shadow across his mouth. "It's been a long time, pard."

"Yeah, a long time," Laramie echoed. "But I don't understand how you. . ."

"Laramie. . ." Ned Cooper heaved himself up on his hands, the tendons in his suburned neck standing out like ropes. He stank of sour sweat and the blood that bubbled up out of his chest. "Elizabeth . . . Tell Elizabeth that I . . ." A spasm of agony contorted his face, blood poured from his mouth in a bright flood, and he fell back, his eyes staring and lifeless.

Laramie heard the hard pound of footsteps and glanced up. The man in Eastern clothes skidded to a stop and said in an Eastern voice, "Give me that damn rifle!"

There was a bloody gash across the side of his head. Without waiting for permission, he snatched the Winchester from Laramie, dropped to one knee and began firing at the bandits. They were far out of range, of course, the last few just disappearing over a distant rise.

The Easterner realized this. He scrambled to his feet with a curse and lunged for Wingfoot. Laramie barred his way.

"Whoa now, stranger," Laramie drawled. "My horse is tuckered out. And even if he wasn't, what could an Eastern dude like you do against a dozen armed bank robbers?"

The Easterner glared at him. "Dude, is it? Damn you, cowboy!"

The man was at least six inches shorter than Laramie. His face was round, plump, innocuous as a babe's. Even bristling with outrage, black button eyes snapping, he looked about as dangerous as an aroused rooster. Laramie suppressed a smile.

Abruptly the sand seemed to run out of the smaller man, and he muttered, "You're right, blast it! I'd be plucked bare as a prairie chicken caught in a tornado!"

Laramie glanced down at the man on the ground. He stooped and closed Ned's eyes.

"You know him?"

"Yeah, I know him," Laramie said absently. His thoughts were elsewhere. Was Ned the reason Elizabeth had left an urgent message for him in Dodge, a message pleading for him to come to her? The last time he'd seen Elizabeth she'd been Mrs. Ned Cooper.

The Easterner was speaking, "It's their trademark, you know."

Laramie focused his gaze on him. "Whose trademark?"

"The Taggert brothers and their gang. They never leave one of their members alive behind to identify them or tell where they hide out between holdups."

Laramie had heard of the Taggert bunch. They made a specialty of robbing trains and had terrorized the railroads for close to two years. He said, "You seem to know quite a bit about the Taggert brothers."

"I should. I'm out here to round them up. I'm Brock Peters—with the Pinkerton Agency. The railroads hired us to break up that bunch."

Laramie took the man's profferred hand, muttered his own name. He was struck with astonishment. One man, and an Eastern dude at that, sent to round up a dozen desperados like the Taggerts? He swallowed a laugh and tried to keep a straight face.

But Peters must have read something in his face, for he said ruefully, "I know, I'm not doing so good. They laid a gun barrel alongside my head and I was out for a spell." He touched his fingers to the head wound and winced.

At that moment a portly man in a conductor's uniform bustled up. He looked pale around the mouth, but he was swollen with an air of self-importance. "Mr. Peters, we have to

get this train moving again. This has thrown us off schedule as it is."

"When did you ever keep on schedule?" Then Peters waved a short-fingered hand. "But you're right. Have somebody unload my horse and you can proceed." The conductor started off, and Peters called after him, "Wait! You'd better load this onto the train." He indicated Ned Cooper's body.

"No," Laramie said curtly. "I'll take his body into Cottonwood Springs, to his wife. It's only a short ride."

Peters looked at him, eyes narrowed in speculation. "Is that so? His wife, huh? All right." He motioned the conductor on. "I'll ride in with you, Nelson."

II

PETERS COULD ride a horse. Laramie Nelson had to grant him that much, even if he did look slightly ridiculous in the Eastern clothes, button shoes on his small feet, round hat perched atop his head like an upturned bowl. Laramie would have laughed, but he didn't feel much like laughing with Ned Cooper's body draped across Wingfoot in front of his saddle.

As they reached the road and headed west, Peters took out a small, thin cigar and lit it. He said, "You want to tell me about him? What's his name? Ned Cooper?"

"There's not much to tell," Laramie said slowly. "I knew Ned . . . about five years ago, I guess. We punched cows together for the same spread, the Lazy H outfit out in Colorado. We were good friends then. Then he met this girl. I was kind of sweet on her, but she married Ned. I stayed around for the wedding, then rode out. That was the last time I saw Ned."

Laramie was silent for a minute, reflecting on what had happened during those five years: range drifting with his inseparable pals, Lonesome and Tracks; the rewarding, challenging months as foreman of the Spanish Peaks spread over in Colorado, and the day of sudden death and passion that climaxed them.

For a while, Laramie had thought he'd found a final home there, heading the cattlemen's protective association, headily in love—a love that was strongly returned—with Hallie Lindsay, his boss's turbulent daughter.

But perhaps their love had been too passionate, the settled life too restricting. Something had burned out between them, and Laramie had known it was time to be riding on. It was the hardest choice he had ever made, and making it had changed him—at least temporarily. The hell-raising daredevil whose reputation had spread through the West was quieter now, thoughtful rather than carefree.

And he was looking for *something*—a new kind of life, maybe—something that would call on his skill, his wits, his nerve, a way of life

that would be a real test for him....

Peters' voice recalled him from his reverie.

"Five years since you saw this Cooper—and you just *happened* to be riding by today?"

"Oh, that. I found a letter waiting for me in Dodge from Elizabeth, that's Ned's wife. The letter said she wanted to see me. So I rode out of Dodge this morning."

"She say why she wanted to see you?"

"Nope. Just said she needed my help bad. If you mean did she mention Ned . . . no, she didn't."

The note had been brief, cryptic. *Dear Laramie, I need help badly. You're the only one to turn to. I've heard that you ride into Dodge City occasionally. If you get this, will you come to the aid of an old friend? Please?*

Peters was speaking. "Did it ever strike you that this Cooper had it in him to turn sour?"

Laramie took his time about answering, his thoughts circling back into the past. "Reckon I never thought much about it one way or another. Oh, he was always a little wild, always in a tearing hurry to get things done, but I thought getting hitched had settled him down some."

"Apparently it didn't," Peters said grimly. "But he's settled down now. Permanently."

Laramie felt a pull of anger, but he held his peace. Peters was right, looking at it from where he stood. They rode awhile in silence, the only sound the creak of saddle leather, the dull plop-plop of hooves in the dust. Although it was now well past mid-afternoon, it had grown hotter. There wasn't a breath of air. Clouds boiled up low on the horizon to the north, like hills humped in the distance, but Laramie figured it was probably a false alarm. A real gully-washer of a rain right now would be welcome, but Laramie doubted it was in the cards.

"Nelson."

Laramie glanced over at him.

Peters jerked his head at Laramie's low-slung, well-worn Colt. "You good with that?"

"I know how to use it," Laramie said evenly.

They locked stares for a moment, neither giving an inch, then Peters let smoke drift out of his mouth and said dryly, "Yes, I'm sure you do."

The sun had dropped out of sight by the time they rode down the dusty main street of Cottonwood Springs. Cottonwood Springs was little more than a cluster of wooden, false-fronted buildings, all leaning south as though once struck by a particularly severe norther. As they rode along, butter-yellow light spilled out of some of the buildings.

People strolling along the boardwalks halted to stare at them, two strangers on horseback, one man draped across a horse like a sack of grain, then hurried on with faces averted.

Laramie reined Wingfoot in toward a hitching rail and called out

to a man on the walk, "Where can I find Elizabeth Cooper?"

The man stopped as though jerked up short at the end of a halter, peered up at Laramie, then swept an arm west. "She lives on the west edge of town. Last house on the right." The man ducked his head and hurried on.

Laramie glanced over at Peters. "Whole town seems spooked."

Peters shrugged. "The Taggert brothers probably rode through here, either coming or going. They're enough to tree any town."

The last house on the edge of town was old, weathered, badly in need of paint. A border of flowers had been planted across the front of the house. Most of them were dead, the others wilted and drooping. There was a light in the window.

Laramie sighed as they reined in before the house. He had no stomach for what he had to do. He caught Peters' glance. The man nodded understandingly, indicating he would stay outside.

Laramie Nelson dismounted stiffly and strode to the door. He rapped firmly with his knuckles. After a moment he heard the sound of footsteps, and the door opened. The years hadn't been kind to Elizabeth. Her face looked drawn, thinner than he remembered it. The brown eyes, staring at him without recognition, were dull, tired.

"Yes?" she said in a neutral voice. Her black hair, falling to her shoulders, was lusterless, stringy, and

she brushed a strand of it out of her eyes. Her face was flushed and damp.

He said quietly, "Hello, Elizabeth."

Her face came alive. "Laramie! I didn't think . . ." Long dress sweeping the floor, she rushed at him and seized his hand. "You came! Thank God!"

"Elizabeth . . . I have bad news."

Her hands tightened convulsively on his, the nails biting into his flesh. "Ned?"

"I'm afraid so."

She dropped his hand and pushed past him. There was enough light to show the two horses and body draped across one. Laramie, thinking she was about to run to Wingfoot, started forward to hold her back.

She didn't move. "Is he . . .?"

"Yes, Elizabeth," he said gently. "He's dead."

She turned to him then, and said in a dead voice, "Will you bring him in, please? The back bedroom."

Laramie went back to Peters and together they carried Ned Cooper inside, Elizabeth showing them the way, carrying a lamp. The interior of the house was clean, the splintery floors still damp from a recent scrubbing, and starched curtains covered the windows, but the furnishings were pitifully few. There were four rooms in all. A large parlor with a fireplace, a kitchen with an iron cookstove, a short hall opening off onto the two bedrooms.

Elizabeth set the lamp on a chest of drawers in the back bedroom. They placed Ned Cooper on the narrow bed, and Laramie removed his boots. Elizabeth took a quilt from the chest and spread it over him.

Laramie and Brock Peters stood aside silently while she stood looking down at her dead husband, hands clasped before her. Her face revealed nothing. Then she bent and pulled the quilt up over his face and turned to them. She pushed the strand of hair out of her eyes.

"I expect you men are hungry. I have a pot of stew cooking. It's soon done. There's a pump out back where you can wash up."

As they washed, Peters said, "Seems to me she takes it calmly enough, her husband fresh killed and all."

"What'd you expect her to do? Beat her breast and scream?" Laramie demanded. "This is the west, Peters. We're used to violent death, even our women."

"That wasn't quite what I meant. She didn't seem at all surprised, as though she'd been expecting it."

Laramie, splashing water over his face and chest, only grunted in reply. His mind was busy with a larger question. Should he tell Elizabeth it was his bullet that had knocked Ned off his horse? Would she hate him for that? He wasn't sure if his bullet or the bandit's had killed Ned, but it really didn't matter. If he hadn't shot Ned off his horse, he'd still be alive.

Elizabeth was putting supper on the table when they re-entered the house. Laramie unbuckled his gunbelt and hung it on a peg just inside the kitchen door, then bent a hard look on Peters. Peters looked obstinate for a moment, then shrugged and took a small gun from the waistband of his trousers and hung it alongside Laramie's.

Laramie said, "Elizabeth, this is Brock Peters. He's a Pinkerton man. He was with me when Ned . . ."

"How do you do, Mrs. Cooper," Peters said courteously.

"How do, Mr. Peters." Elizabeth's glance jumped to Laramie. "I want to hear about it, but eat first."

The two men sat, and Elizabeth served them before sitting across from them. She put food on her plate, but she did little more than pick at it. The stew and the fresh-

baked bread were delicious. Laramie felt uncomfortable about eating with Ned Cooper laid out in the back bedroom, but he discovered he was ravenous. And Peters pitched in with a good appetite, so Laramie ate heartily.

When they were done, Elizabeth served them mugs of steaming coffee. Laramie rolled a cigarette, and Peters asked Elizabeth's permission to light one of his little cigars.

Elizabeth said, "Laramie?"

He sighed heavily and leaned back. "Ned was in on a train holdup, Elizabeth, with the Taggert gang. They took a payroll off the mail car and got away clean. All except Ned." He took a deep breath and said harshly, "I shot him, Elizabeth. Of course I didn't know it was Ned at the time, he was masked, but I shot him."

Elizabeth nodded slowly. Laramie Nelson could detect no animosity in her attitude.

Peters spoke up, "I think Nelson only winged him. It was one of the Taggerts who finished him off. That's their trademark."

Elizabeth nodded again. "Lyle Taggert, most likely. They're both mean but Lyle's the meanest." Bitterness burned in her voice like acid. "I told Ned they'd kill him without batting an eye if they ever had the slightest excuse."

"What happened to Ned?" Laramie asked. "The Ned I knew was a little wild, but I'd never have figured him for something like this."

"He wasn't the Ned you knew, Laramie, hadn't been for a long time. Ned was a weak man. I knew that before I'd been married to him a year."

The brown eyes gazed into Laramie's, and he remembered the girl she had been—and the half-formed desires he had felt—and he knew she was remembering, too.

Faint color touched her cheeks. She pushed the hair out of her eyes and hurried on. "But I'd made my bargain, so I stuck with it. Ned failed at everything he tried. He'd fail in one place and we'd drift on to another. He always blamed something or someone for his failures, never himself. The last thing he tried was farming and you know how much he hated farming, Laramie. But he even failed at that.

"The railroad wanted our farm. Ned thought he could hold out and force them to pay a steep price. He was wrong. They could afford to wait and freeze him out. In the end he was forced to let them have it for almost nothing. That was six months ago. Somehow that seemed the last straw. He blamed the railroad and could think of nothing but getting even. The only way he could see was to rob them and he couldn't do it alone."

"So he joined the Taggerts," Peters said.

"He joined the Taggerts. He practically had to beg them. I didn't even know he'd been taken in. He didn't tell me." Her voice dropped to a

whisper, and she stared down at her plate. "And he even failed at that, too. Poor, doomed Ned." She got up to refill Peters' coffee mug.

"And that's why I sent for you, Laramie. I was desperate. I did everything I could to talk him out of it. Nothing worked. I thought maybe you could."

Laramie heard a noise at the kitchen door and glanced that way just as a tall man dressed in black stepped in. He held a sixgun at waist level, aimed at the table.

"All right, you two buckos! Keep your hands on the table or I'll blow your heads off!"

III

ELIZABETH LOOKED around at the intruder. "Oh, for Heaven's sake, Claude! What do you think you're doing?"

The man jerked his head without taking his gaze from Laramie Nelson and Brock Peters. "You stay out of this, Elizabeth. This is law business." He moved closer to the table.

It was then Laramie noticed the marshal's badge pinned to his fancy vest. He wore crossed gunbelts, his left hand hovering near the pearl handle of the holstered gun. He was a commanding presence in his black clothes, with broad shoulders, piercing black eyes, heavy moustache and hawk nose, yet Laramie sensed an uncertainty in him.

For some reason he never afterward understood, Laramie looked over at Peters, who was holding the nearly full mug of coffee cupped in his hands. Peters nodded almost imperceptibly. Laramie tensed himself, and Peters moved with blinding speed, tossing the scalding coffee into the marshal's face and throwing himself sideways off the chair.

At the same instant Laramie moved also, to one side and down, scuttling bent over under the protecting lee of the table toward the marshal.

A hoarse bellow of pain erupted from the marshal and the gun roared. Laramie straightened, coming up almost in the marshal's face, ready to whack him with his fist. It wasn't necessary. The marshal was pawing at his streaming eyes with his free hand. Laramie snatched the gun from his unresisting hand and plucked the other from his holster.

Elizabeth came with a towel and guided the marshal to her chair and began swabbing gently at his eyes. "You're an idiot, Claude Rigney!" she scolded.

The marshal said plaintively, "There was no need to do that. I could have been blinded!"

"Oh, I don't think so," Peters said blithely. "Mrs. Cooper's coffee isn't *that* bad. And I don't like strange men pointing guns at me. It makes me nervous."

"But I'm the law here!"

"That cuts no dice with me," Peters retorted. "I've seen lawmen turn sour before."

"Just what is it the law wants

with us, Marshal?" Laramie asked.

"It was told to me that you two rode in here with a dead man, that you came out here with him." Rigney's eyes were better now. He squinted at Laramie. "Is that right?"

"That's right."

"Then why didn't you come to me?"

"Because it's Ned, that's why!" Elizabeth cried.

Rigney twisted his head up to stare at her. "Ned?"

"He was killed trying to rob a mail car. Lyle Taggert killed him!"

Rigney scowled across the table. "What part did you two play in the robbery?"

"I'm Brock Peters, Pinkerton man. I'm out here after the Taggerts."

"And I'm Laramie Nelson."

Rigney's gaze sharpened. "Laramie Nelson? I've heard that name. You're a gunfighter, ain't you?"

"I can use one, if it comes to that."

"We don't care for gunslicks in Cottonwood Springs!" Rigney said in a high voice. "You remember that!"

Laramie drawled, "I'll keep it in mind."

"Oh, stop it!" Elizabeth stomped her foot. "Laramie's an old friend, Claude. I wrote him to come!"

Peters had just lit a fresh cigar. He said through a cloud of smoke, "Suppose we could round up a posse and ride out after the Taggerts, Marshal?"

"The people in Cottonwood Springs stick pretty much to their own business," the marshal said stiffly. "They're not much interested in helping the railroad."

"Seems to me there wouldn't *be* any Cottonwood Springs, or not much anyway, except for the railroad."

"The truth is," Elizabeth said scathingly, "the people here are scared silly of the Taggerts. They dig a hole every time they hear the Taggerts are coming!"

Rigney said, "Now Elizabeth, you shouldn't be so hard on the folks hereabouts. They have families to think of."

"Huh!" Elizabeth was magnificently scornful.

Peters drew on his cigar. "I guess that leaves it up to me then. I'll have to ride after them myself."

Laramie stared. "*You?*"

"That's what I said," Peters said, unperturbed. "Of course, it would help considerable if I knew where they hide out between jobs."

"I know," Elizabeth said.

They all gazed at her in astonishment, including Marshal Rigney.

"Well, I do!" She faced them defiantly. "I rode out there once with Ned when he was trying to join them. The Taggerts didn't know I was with him. I stayed behind in camp and Ned rode in alone. They hide out in a blind canyon, only one way in and out. It's over in—" She stopped abruptly, her glance skipping from one to the other.

"Well, Mrs. Cooper? Where?"

"No." She swung her head from side to side. "A bargain first. The only way I tell is to go go along. I lead the way in!"

Laramie's breath exploded. "You can't mean that!"

"I mean every word of it!"

"Elizabeth . . . I'm the law here and I'll handle this," Rigney said somewhat pompously.

"No," she said stubbornly. "I go along or you get nothing from me. I aim to see the Taggerts pay for Ned's death. Maybe he was weak, maybe he deserved what happened, but they're to blame!"

"All right, Mrs. Cooper," Peters said. "I'll accept your terms. We'll start early tomorrow morning."

"No," Elizabeth said again. "First, I have to bury Ned."

Laramie was listening with mounting disbelief. His respect for Peters had grown. Whatever else he was, the little man had guts. Throwing the coffee in Rigney's face had proved that. But even so . . .

He said, "You must be out of your minds, both of you! An Eastern dude and a woman going after the Taggert bunch!"

"Nelson, I've had enough of 'Eastern dude.' " Peters' eyes were flinty and cold. "I'll have to ask you to put a stop to it."

Taken aback, Laramie Nelson said, "You're right and I'm sorry. But that still doesn't make it right you should risk Elizabeth's life on such a jackass stunt. If you want to risk yours, that's your lookout."

"And I should think it's Mrs. Cooper's lookout what she wants to do. I'm not dragging her along roped and tied. She goes, it's of her own free will."

"He's right, Laramie. It's my life to risk, so I'll thank you to stay out of it," Elizabeth said distantly.

"Oh, for–!" In disgust Laramie thrust the guns at Rigney. "Take these back, Marshal, before I shoot myself."

Rigney stood up, holstered the guns with a show of dignity. He glanced at Elizabeth, started to say something, then settled for a nod, turned on his heel and strode out.

"Good riddance," Elizabeth muttered, staring after him. "He's a poor excuse for a marshal. All he could do for Ned before was threaten to arrest him for being drunk and disorderly."

A change had come over Elizabeth. She was no longer listless but seemed charged with energy. Her color was high, and she had shed her weariness like a cloak.

It would seem, Laramie thought as he watched her, that Ned's death had removed a heavy load from her shoulders. Either that or the prospect of revenging him had given her a new lease on life.

Now she faced around, her glance going immediately to him. "Laramie, forgive me. I didn't mean to sound so . . ."

"Forget it." He batted a hand at her, then shook his head, his face mournful. "I must be out of my mind, too, but I'll go along with you

two idiots. Maybe I can keep you from getting killed. Although why I want to bother, I'm sure I don't know."

Elizabeth clapped her hands like a child."Laramie, that's wonderful!"

"Yeah." Nelson turned to Peters. "We'd better go see if we can find a room for the night."

"Oh, no!" Elizabeth said in quick dismay. "There's no need for that. There's room here." Her gaze darted toward the back bedroom.

Laramie knew she was thinking of being left alone for the night with her husband's body. And something else occurred to him. She might be in some danger. He said, "All right, maybe that would be best. But I'll take the horses uptown and stable them. They'll need a rubdown and a good feed before heading out tomorrow."

Laramie strapped on his gunbelt and left the house with Peters. Outside he said, "You'd better stay with Elizabeth. I want a look at this town. The chance of the Taggerts knowing that Elizabeth knows the location of their hideout is pretty slim, but it's possible. She'll never be safe again as long as the Taggerts are free."

"Glad you're going with us, Nelson. You'll lessen the odds considerable."

Laramie snorted."Don't pat yourself on the back. It has nothing to do with you. The only reason I'm going is Elizabeth."

"The reason doesn't matter," Peters said cheerfully. "So long as

you've decided to come with us."

Laramie led Wingfoot and Peters' horse away from behind the house where they'd been tethered by a tub of water and walked them toward the center of town and the livery stable he'd seen as they rode in. Once in the covering darkness, he allowed his face to relax in a faint grin. He still thought they were riding out on a foolhardy mission, but Peters had sand. He'd do to ride with.

Although it was only a little after nine, most of the town was already asleep, all the buildings dark except the two saloons directly across the street from each other. They were lit but even they seemed unusually quiet, with none of the usual loud voices and raucous laughter.

Laramie located the livery stable.

There was no one around, but it was unlocked. He found a lantern hanging inside the door. He led the horses to two empty stalls, unsaddled them, gave them some grain and water, then rubbed them down with an old blanket. They were done eating and stood with heads drooping tiredly by the time he'd finished with the grooming.

He stood in the doorway of the stable for a moment, rolling a cigarette, his fingers performing the familiar task easily in the dark. He poked the cigarette into his mouth and struck a match on his bootheel.

He heard a faint sound off to his right, and a danger signal thrummed along his nerve-ends. Instinctively, he threw himself down and to one side before he saw a firefly-flash of orange flame. He heard the sound of the shot as he hit the ground rolling. He rolled over twice and came up on one elbow, Colt in his hand.

He got off two quick shots at the place where he'd seen the wink of light, but he knew he couldn't pinpoint the spot well enough to hope for a hit. After the sounds of his shots died away, silence fell.

He listened intently but heard nothing. Something began to bother him. After a moment he realized what it was. It was much too quiet. The three gunshots should have aroused *some* attention. But there was no hue and cry. No lights came on. Nobody came running out. The saloons were only a few doors up the street, yet he saw no curious faces poking out to see what the noise was all about.

Either the whole town was too spooked to investigate or they had all been forewarned not to venture out.

But there was a more important consideration. Who had taken a shot at him and why? Had the Taggerts left someone behind who had learned they were riding out after them? Or had some young gunslick heard of Laramie Nelson's reputation and decided to add to his own rep? But that wasn't the way it was done. There was no glory in drygulching a well-known gunfighter. That was done with an open challenge and a shoot-out on Main Street with plenty of witnesses.

Without thinking, Laramie had rolled another cigarette. But this time he stepped inside the stable to strike the match. Then he strolled down the main street of Cottonwood Springs, taking his time, his gaze alertly probing every dark nook on the way. He didn't see a soul and reached the Cooper house without being challenged.

IV

LARAMIE NELSON had been wrong about the rain. He awoke in the night to the sound of thunder, followed by the drumming of rain on the roof. It was still raining lightly the next morning, a gray and gloomy day.

"It's fitting, I guess," Elizabeth said. "Ned always liked wet, dreary

and somber days just like this one."

There was only a scattering of the townspeople at the funeral. Marshal Rigney stood off to one side, resplendent in black, black slicker glistening in the drizzle.

A strip of canvas had been stretched across the grave in which rested a pine box holding Ned Cooper. The preacher droned the words. Elizabeth stood across the grave from him, Laramie and Peters flanking her. Water dripped from the canvas. The odor of fresh earth and raw pine mingled with the smell of rain.

Elizabeth endured without a tear until the preacher spoke the final word and gestured to two men with shovels. As the first shovel of dirt thudded onto the pine coffin, she sobbed once, wrenchingly, and turned blindly away.

"Laramie," she said in a taut voice, "I'll be ready to ride in a half hour."

Laramie nodded. "You go on back to the house with her, Peters. I'll get the horses."

Laramie had fallen into the habit of command, as he was accustomed to doing in any situation, but he was a little surprised at Peters taking his orders so readily.

As he headed toward the livery stable, he saw the sun break through in the east and he noticed that the rain had stopped. Was that a good omen? At least the heat had broken.

Wingfoot was rested and frisky, and Laramie had trouble getting a saddle on him. Finally he led the horses up the street and hitched them before the general store. Elizabeth had told him she would pack what food they would need. But Laramie bought a few items. Tobacco, a supply of shells both for the Winchester and his Colt. Then he paused for a moment, frowning.

Many days' riding across wild country lay ahead of them—country where outlaws like the Taggerts, and bands of hostile or renegade Indians roved at will. And all they had was a couple of handguns and a rifle.

"We could use about a troop of artillery," he reflected wryly.

Then one item of the storekeeper's stock struck his eye. He thought for an instant, then grinned broadly. "Now there's the next best thing. Some artillery," he told himself. "Could give some hostiles a mighty hot time."

Still grimly amused, he made a final purchase.

When he rode up before the Cooper house, there was a saddled horse waiting in front. It was a rangy, powerful-looking animal with a mean look.

Peters and Elizabeth emerged as Laramie reined in. Peters was carrying saddlebags stuffed with provisions. Elizabeth had a rifle under her arm. She was wearing boots, faded trousers and a man's shirt. She looked years younger, somehow a little rowdy. Even in a man's attire, she was clearly a woman, and a damned attractive one.

He said, "That's a pretty salty-looking animal, Elizabeth. Sure you can manage him?"

"I can manage him," she said spiritedly. "He's mine. I had to fight Ned like the dickens to keep him from selling Sam."

Laramie was amused. "Sam? That's a hell of a name for a horse."

She marched up to the horse and vaulted into the saddle without assistance. Sam reared, snorting. Elizabeth sawed on the reins, pulling his head back, talking to him in a low voice. The horse gradually subsided and stood pawing at the ground. Elizabeth glanced over at Laramie.

"I guess you've forgotten how well I can ride," she said.

"No, I haven't forgotten," he said soberly.

Laramie heard the clop of hoof-beats and looked around. Marshal Rigney was riding toward them on a big black horse, tall in the saddle, black clothes free of dust, pearl gun handles glinting in the sun.

Right out of a Ned Buntline dime novel, Laramie Nelson thought sourly.

The marshal pulled his horse up. "Since the robbery took place in my territory, I thought I'd ride with you."

"Afraid you'll get fired if you don't?" Elizabeth asked. "Isn't that it, Claude?"

The marshal reddened, but he didn't rise to the bait.

Peters swung up on his horse. "Welcome, Marshal. One more man evens the odds that much more."

"You don't know Claude. Just wait," Elizabeth muttered. She chirped to Sam and started off at a trot.

Laramie swung Wingfoot in beside Brock Peters. "Any idea where we're headed?"

"Somewhere over in Colorado. That's all she'd tell me. About a week's ride."

"The Taggerts could be gone on another raid by the time we get there."

"Not the Taggerts. I've studied the way they work. They make a good haul, they hole up for a spell with a good supply of whiskey and lay around drunk until most of the money's gone. They won't move again for at least a month."

It was now mid-morning, and the sky was clear of clouds, the sun blazing down. It would be hot again before the day was over, but at least the dust was settled. Elizabeth set a good pace, always bearing west. Once Laramie rode up alongside her, but she didn't seem inclined to talk. Her face was shadowed with sadness, and he realized the funeral must still be on her mind. He respected her mood and dropped back to ride with Peters.

Rigney hung back, as though reluctant to be seen with them. Even when they stopped for a cold noon meal, he sat apart, not talking.

"Friendly cuss, ain't he?" Laramie drawled.

"He'll be no help," Elizabeth said.

Peters asked, "Can he use those fancy guns of his?"

"Oh, he can shoot, I'll give him that. He can shoot at something that doesn't shoot back!"

"You ever see him back down?"

Elizabeth shrugged. "Who's to back down from in Cottonwood Springs? Ther're no hardcases around, only Saturday night drunks to jail. Whenever the Taggerts rode through he always managed to be out of town!"

Laramie said, "You sure you don't just have a spite on for him because he tried to jail Ned for being drunk?"

He was sorry the instant the words were out, but it was too late. Elizabeth glared at him, her mouth working, and he thought she was about to break into tears. Then she jumped up and walked stiffly to her horse and began cinching the saddle.

"A little hard on her, weren't you, Nelson?"

"Maybe." Laramie got to his feet. "Let's ride."

They pushed hard all afternoon and made camp at sundown in a grove of cottonwoods by a meandering creek. After the horses were unsaddled and turned loose to graze, Laramie said, "I'll see if I can get us a couple of rabbits for supper."

With the Winchester in the crook of his arm, Laramie trudged up a small, grassy knoll about a quarter mile from camp. There was still ample light by the time he topped the rise and paused to look around. He spotted a cottontail about forty yards away, ears up, sniffing the wind. As Laramie brought his rifle to his shoulder, a gun cracked behind him and the rabbit leaped convulsively and tumbled over dead.

Laramie wheeled about. A few yards behind him and to the right stood Marshal Rigney, smoke drifting up from the snout of the pearl-handled sixgun in his hand.

The marshal's hawk face wore a meager grin. "Why waste a Winchester bullet on an easy shot like that?"

"You're pretty handy with that, Marshal," Laramie drawled. "But it ain't always such a good idea to sneak up behind a man like that and fire off a pistol."

Rigney stiffened. His eyes began to burn. "Who's sneaking?"

The sixgun was still in his hand, the barrel slanted toward the ground. Now it came up slowly until it was aimed dead center on Laramie's heart. Laramie stood easily, rifle held negligently in his left hand. He watched the marshal's eyes for the tightening that would mean he was about to fire. Laramie didn't so much as move an eyelash.

Then Rigney laughed harshly and holstered his gun. "You push a man pretty hard, Nelson."

Past him, Laramie caught a flicker of movement. Another cottontail bounded through the tall grass. The range was about forty yards but this one was in motion, a much more difficult shot. Almost in one motion

Laramie drew and fired. His bullet caught the rabbit in mid-air and flipped him over twice.

At Laramie's draw Rigney had sent one hand clawing for his gun, then had frozen in mid-motion.

"One apiece," Laramie drawled. "I reckon we're even so far."

Ignoring Rigney, he strode past and picked up his rabbit. It had been a grandstand play and could have backfired badly if he had missed. Laramie experienced a spurt of pride he recognized as being childish. Even so, he was glad he had carried it off. There was something about Rigney that rubbed him the wrong way.

He got a second cottontail before returning to camp. He heard another shot on his way back, and Rigney followed him in a few minutes later, also carrying two rabbits.

Peters and Elizabeth had fire going, a coffeepot bubbling and a spit built for the rabbits. Laramie and the marshal quickly skinned and gutted their animals and turned them over to Elizabeth. Not long after full dark they were all well-fed and sipping their coffee, Rigney again sitting off to one side, glowering and silent.

Although Elizabeth had cooked their supper quickly and efficiently, she was also unusually quiet. Now she gathered up the dishes and prepared to carry them down to the creek.

Laramie got to his feet. "Let me tote those for you, Elizabeth."

She surrendered them without a word and led the way down to the creek. There was a crescent moon, a silvery glow filtering down through the leafy cottonwoods. Elizabeth sat on a fallen log at the water's edge and washed each tin dish as Laramie handed it to her.

"Elizabeth," Laramie said tentatively. "I'm sorry for a couple of things I've said."

"That's all right, I didn't really mind."

"Then you're not sore? I mean . . . you've hardly said a word all day."

"It's not that, Laramie. It's not you. It's . . . *me!*" Her voice was fierce, angry. "I'm mad at myself. I can't *feel* anything! I know, at the grave I sobbed once, but I think that was because I'm so darned mad."

"Well . . . I understand the shock of something like this takes some time to get over. You'll be okay."

She shook her head. "No, no, you don't understand! I didn't love Ned. It's almost a relief to be rid of him." She brushed the hair out of her eyes. "And that makes me out to be a heartless, uncaring woman!"

"If that's the way you feel, why are you so dead set on getting the Taggerts?"

"Because they're responsible for his death, and he was my husband. They should be made pay for that! The fact that I didn't love Ned makes it even worse!"

Laramie reflected on the female mind. What mere man could follow the reasoning of a woman?

"Laramie," she said in a softer voice. He saw that she was looking at him intently, eyes huge and shining in the moonlight. "All these years . . . did you ever think of me?"

"Why, yes, of course I did," he said warily.

"I did. I thought of you often, wondering what you were doing, how it would be married to you."

"Not good," he said lightly. "The kind of life I lead wouldn't be easy on a woman."

"But haven't you ever thought of getting married, settling down?"

Laramie's face turned hard. "I did, for sure," he said grimly, remembering Spanish Peaks . . . and Hallie. "But–it didn't take. I reckon I'm just a rolling stone, Elizabeth, never meant to settle down."

"Could that be because . . .?" She straightened abruptly. "You see? There I go again, talking about . . . I'm a hard woman, Ned not even cold yet."

"Not hard, Elizabeth. You could never be that."

"Thank you for saying that, Laramie." She got to her feet and placed a hand lightly on his arm. "Try to forget what I've been saying. Starting tomorrow, I'll be thinking only of what we're out here to do."

V

THEY RAN INTO the band of renegade Indians the afternoon of the fourth day.

The country was more broken

now, the plains left behind, and they had started to climb. Although they occasionally came across a herd of grazing cattle, they hadn't seen a farm all day. It was still hot, but the air was clearer, sharper, the nights cooler. And in mid-morning Laramie had seen a long blue smudge on the western horizon that he knew to be the shape of the Rocky Mountains. Two more days' ride and the Rockies would be looming up in all their awesome majesty.

True to her word, Elizabeth had been all business on the second day and since, setting a hard pace that covered many miles a day. It was quite clear that she knew where she was going, and she led the way unhesitatingly.

They were following a faint trail along the bottom of a deep draw, Elizabeth two lengths in front, when

she pulled up sharply and pointed an arm up. "Look!"

Lined up on the north rim of the draw were more than a dozen Indians on small ponies and carrying rifles. They were still as statues.

Laramie and Peters reined in. Peters asked, "Hostiles?"

"It's hard to say. As far as I know, we're at peace with the redskins in this area. If they are hostiles, I'd guess a band of renegades. In any case we'd better take cover. We're sitting ducks like this."

Laramie raised his voice. "Take cover! Behind those rocks!"

In times past floodwaters had cut a small wash into the side of the draw, leaving huge boulders strewn about as though dropped by some playful giant.

Elizabeth had already swung her horse in that direction before Laramie shouted. Now, as Laramie and Peters sent their mounts racing after her, the frozen tableau on the rim shattered. Wild yells ricocheted across the draw, and bullets sang around them. Then they were behind the boulders, miraculously unhurt. Rigney came pounding in behind them.

Elizabeth was already behind a boulder, levering her rifle. Laramie hit the ground running, dropping to one knee beside her. The horses huddled back under the lee of the overhang.

The Indians on the far bank were riding back and forth, firing steadily. Laramie got off a couple of shots, then ceased firing. He shouted, "Hold your fire! They're too far out of range. We're just wasting bullets!"

Beside him, Peters asked, "What are they, Nelson? Apaches?"

"Apaches?" Laramie twisted his head around. Peters was cool, as unruffled as though sitting down to supper. "A hell of a lot you know about Indians! Apaches never range this far north. They're in the border states, desert country. Besides, if these were Apaches, we'd've been dead before we knew they were within miles of us."

Peters shrugged. "So I don't know about Indians. Back east we're always reading about the warrior Apaches. What are these, then?"

"Hard to tell. Could be Comanches, Cheyenne. Could even be a mixture, renegades banded together to raid and plunder."

Marshal Rigney slid in beside them, crouching low, ignoring the dust around his boots. He was breathing heavily, his face pale and drawn. "Whose idea was this? We're pinned down here like flies on molasses!"

Laramie gave him a cold stare. "We had little choice as I saw it. If we'd tried to ride down that draw, either way, they'd have picked us off one by one. The only way they can get at us here is head-on. They can't get at us from above." He glanced up. "That overhang protects us."

"They can keep us pinned down here until we starve to death or die of thirst," Rigney said sullenly.

"They may get tired before then. This ain't a war party out for blood. They're looking for loot and I'd say we don't look like much. Except for you, in that fancy outfit." Laramie raked Rigney with his gaze. He was beginning to wish he had heeded Elizabeth's warning. "If you don't like it here, Marshal, ride out. Nobody's holding you back. Me, I like it just fine."

Peters broke in, "What do think they'll do, Nelson?"

"Oh, they'll make a try at us. Maybe more than one, but we're located pretty good here—"

"Here they come!" Elizabeth shouted.

Laramie peered around his boulder. The Indians were plunging down the sloping side of the draw, the horses stiff-legged in front, hindquarters skidding in the shale. Now the first one reached the bottom and came at the boulders on a slant, the little pony running all out, belly skimming low over the ground. The others were strung out behind him. The Indians rode low, firing and yelling as they came. The noise was deafening.

"All right ... now!" Laramie yelled at the top of his voice.

They began firing steadily, the shots echoing and re-echoing like whipcracks. The charge was broken less than thirty yards from the nest of boulders. The Indians turned their ponies in a tight circle and rode back the way they came, dust screening them now from view.

As the dust settled, Laramie counted four still bodies. "Not bad. Anybody hurt?"

He looked around. Elizabeth gave him a pale smile. Peters winked. He was beaming and excited, the bowler hat perched on his head at a cocky angle.

Rigney said, "They made it within twenty yards of us. The next time they may ride right in before we can turn them!"

"Will there be a next time, Nelson?" Peters asked.

Laramie squinted at the sun. There was less than an hour to go before sundown. "Yes, they'll make at least one more try. Between sundown and dusk, when they'll be harder to see."

"And if we turn them back, what then?"

"Then we wait and see." Laramie got to his feet. "We'd all better have a drink. I'll get the canteens."

He propped his rifle against the boulder and walked back to the horses. He didn't make any effort at concealment. The Indians were all grouped across the draw, powwowing. Some Indians he'd known were good shots, but he'd never known one *that* good at this distance.

The horses were a little spooky. Laramie spent a few minutes quieting them, then returned with the canteens and passed them around.

Peters took a long gulp of water before saying, "Is there any truth to the story that Indians won't attack at night? Something to do with their belief in spirits bringing bad luck?"

"Depends."

"Depends on what?"

"Depends on the Indian. Most of them I'd say no, they won't attack after dark. It all depends on how much the particular Indian believes in his spirits. They're human like us. And some of us believe in some things more strongly than others do. But these renegades ... Who knows what they believe?"

Now they waited.

Peters leaned his back against the boulder, hat tilted down over his

eyes, and dozed. Laramie had to marvel at him anew. Seeing the Pinkerton man for the first time like this, Laramie would have put it down as pure bravado, but he knew better now.

Rigney sat tensely, now and then peering around the boulder. Every few minutes he took a swallow of water from the canteen, his throat working convulsively.

"Better take it easy on that, Marshal," Laramie drawled. "It may have to last awhile. If you drink yours, don't expect any from us."

Rigney bared his teeth in a snarl, eyes glinting wolfishly, but he capped the canteen and put it down. He was far from dapper now. His clothes were dusty, sweat-stained, his boots dull, and a day's beard stubbled his cheeks.

Laramie moved closer to Elizabeth. "You all right?"

She pushed the hair out of her eyes and managed a smile. "I'm fine, Laramie. I'm just sorry I led you into this."

"Not your fault. We'll get out safe and sound, don't fret," he said with far more confidence than he felt. He found her hand and squeezed it. She turned her hand over and returned the pressure fiercely. Then her hand loosened, and she put her head back, eyes closing.

They waited.

The sun dropped out of sight, the swift twilight descending. Laramie began to think the Indians weren't going to attack again.

Then a hoarse shout came from Rigney. "They're coming!"

Laramie got to one knee and looked around the boulder. They charged in a ragged line this time, several yards separating each rider. The far side of the draw was in deep shadow, and they seemed to boil up out of the ground, like yelling demons out of some black pit.

"Fire at the four in the center," Laramie said tersely. "Starting with you, Marshal, left to right. But wait until they're close. We can't afford to miss."

Laramie leveled his rifle at the third Indian from the left of the center four, got the man in his sights and waited, bullets pinging off the boulder around him, until the oncoming Indian seemed about to ride down the rifle barrel. Then he squeezed the trigger. The Indian screamed piercingly and flew off the pony backward. The pony came on, veering aside just in time to avoid crashing into the boulder.

Laramie looked quickly left and right. Two more Indians down. Score one each for Peters and Elizabeth. But how about Rigney? Laramie didn't have time to look. The others were bunching up now, very close. He fired into them rapidly, trying for firepower more than accuracy.

Most of the attackers had started to turn back, but one rode in, driving his pony between the two boulders shielding the marshal and Peters. The Indian had lost his rifle in the charge, but he had a tomahawk in his right

hand. He wheeled the pony in behind Peters, who seemed totally unaware of his danger.

Laramie raised his rifle, triggered it and heard a click. Empty! The Indian rode at Peters, leaning far out, the tomahawk ready to cleave through the bowler hat and into Peters' skull.

Laramie dropped his Winchester and leaped, his arms reaching. He caught the Indian around the waist, and they tumbled into the dust together.

The Indian's body was greased and slippery. He stank of rancid fat and the odor of many cooking fires. They rolled over and over, first one on top, then the other, Laramie desperately trying to retain his grip. Then his hold was broken, the Indian on top, astraddle him.

Laramie saw the lethal glitter in the man's eyes, saw the tomahawk raised and start down with the speed of a striking rattler. Laramie heaved mightily and twisted his head aside just in time. He heard the tomahawk thump into the ground alongside his head, and he continued his roll, throwing his assailant off.

They came to their feet at the same time. From the lack of pull on his hip Laramie knew he'd lost his sixgun in the struggle. They circled each other warily. Laramie maneuvered the Indian until his back was to the boulder. Then he feinted right. The tomahawk whistled down, Laramie barely avoiding the slashing blade.

Then he drove in, shoulder low, caught the Indian around the waist and slammed him up against the boulder. The Indian grunted sharply, the breath sighing from him, and Laramie heard the tomahawk clatter against the rock as it fell from the Indian's hand.

Laramie slammed him against the boulder again and yet again. He heard something crack, the Indian went limp, and Laramie loosened his grip, letting the lifeless body fall to the ground.

It wasn't until then he noticed how quiet it was, no screams, no shots. Elizabeth, Peters and Rigney were all staring at him.

Peters whistled through his teeth. "Nelson, you're some man, you know that? I wouldn't want to get you riled at me." He pushed his hat back on his head. "I guess I owe you my life. Thanks."

Laramie gestured in some annoyance and looked around for his gun. He picked it up off the ground, spun the cylinder to check if it was free of dust, then holstered it. "They're all gone?" He looked around the boulders, but it was full dark and he couldn't see a thing.

Elizabeth said, "They're all gone, Laramie. At least for the time being."

Laramie plucked his hat out of the dust, slapped it twice against his leg and said, "Then let's make a run for it."

Elizabeth stared. "Now?"

"This is the best time."

Rigney said, "But they're probably laying for us out there!"

"Not this soon. They're either scattered, given up, or disorganized. And it's dark. They can't see us any better than we can see them." He peered at the marshal. "What's wrong? A bit ago you were belly-aching about pinned down here."

"But suppose he's right, Nelson?" Peters asked. "Suppose they *are* waiting out there?"

"We shoot our way through. We have a choice . . . wait out the night in the hope they're gone for good. If they're not, we're pinned down here another day and we may not be so lucky. Or else we ride out!"

VI

THEY RODE out slowly, keeping everything as muffled as possible, the men removing their spurs. Laramie put Elizabeth and Rigney in the middle, while he and Peters bracketed them on each side. The night was dark, quiet except for the slow, muffled candence of their hoofbeats and an occasional creak of saddle leather.

One hundred yards, two hundred yards . . .

Laramie sensed rather than felt the ground become steeper, and he knew they were climbing up out of the draw. Suddenly his alert ears detected a sound to his right, and a rifle roared. Laramie, expecting it, fired at the splash of flame and heard a high-pitched scream as his bullet hit home. The others had their instructions. At the first hint of trouble they were to ride and ride hard. Laramie waited a couple of minutes, listening, until he was sure there were no sounds of immediate pursuit, then sent Wingfoot after them.

There was an element of danger riding pell-mell in the dark. A horse could step in a hole or just plain stumble and break a leg. It was a risk they had to take.

After about two miles Laramie overtook a slowing horse.

Elizabeth's voice came at him out of the dark. "Laramie?"

"Yeah," he said roughly. "What if it hadn't been me?"

"I was worried. Are they after us?"

"Not as far as I can tell."

Another horse loomed up. "Nelson . . . is that you?"

"Why not let the whole countryside know?" Laramie grumbled. He raised his voice slightly. "Yes, damn it, it's me!"

"We're just worried about you, is all." Elizabeth's voice was ever so faintly reproving.

"Yeah. Well . . ." As always, when danger had passed, Laramie felt disgruntled, melancholy. He sighed, scrubbing a hand down across his face. "Sorry. Guess I'm not used to people worrying about me."

A few miles farther on, they made a cold camp for the night. Without risking a fire, they unsaddled the horses in the dark, hobbled them and rolled up in their blankets on the ground, all except Laramie. "We'd better keep watch all night, just in case. I'll stand the first one. I'll wake you for the second, Marshal. You take the third and last, Peters."

Laramie had selected a small rise for their camp. Although there wasn't any moon, there was a certain amount of light, and he depended on Wingfoot to alert him if they had company. The horse was good as any watchdog.

Soon the only sounds were the snorting of the horses and a soft snore from one of the men. Laramie smoked sparingly, always shielding the match flame behind cupped hands held a few inches off the ground.

The night moved on without incident, and Laramie could give free rein to his troubled thoughts. He was troubled on several counts. First, of course, was their crazy mission. It was insane for three men and a woman even to think of capturing at least a dozen hardcases like the Taggert gang holed up in what, from the little he'd been able to glean from Elizabeth, was a hideout just about impregnable to attack. He had gone along with the idea originally in the hope that Peters and Elizabeth would see how senseless it was and back off.

But he knew that their resolve was hardening with every passing day. The Pinkerton man didn't seem in the least daunted by what faced them. And Elizabeth, spurred by guilt and her thirst for vengeance, was obviously bent on going ahead no matter what the odds.

Elizabeth . . . She troubled Laramie more than anything else. Five years ago, he'd been younger. What he'd felt for Elizabeth was a boy's casual interest. After the fire of his love for Hallie Lindsay, and the surging passion of her response, he had an understanding of women that he'd lacked before. And he knew that Elizabeth, after a decent interval had passed, would welcome a serious courtship. She was all woman, and quite a woman at that, and would make some man a fine wife. But Laramie sensed, deep down, that that was not what he was seeking.

He sighed heavily, crossed to where Rigney was sleeping and nudged him with a toe. "Marshal?"

Rigney sat up with a startled snort. "Nelson? Is it time for me to . . . ?

"Yeah."

"Anything happen?"

"It's been quiet as a church. And I don't expect anything. But don't go dozing off. There's always an outside chance."

The only answer was a surly grunt as Rigney got to his feet. Laramie rolled up hin his blanket and was asleep almost instantly.

He awoke to a cool dawn, to birds singing, and to the smell of fresh coffee. For a moment he felt good, then he remembered where he was and what he was doing there, and he cursed himself for seven kinds of a fool.

He turned his head and saw Elizabeth bent over a small fire. Several days on the trail, wearing men's clothes, she still managed to look wholly feminine.

She glanced up and saw him watching her. Faint rose color touched her cheeks, and she looked suddenly shy. "Good morning, Laramie."

Laramie felt good again. "Good morning." He rolled out of the blanket and approached the fire. Peters was hunkered down by it, small cigar smouldering, a tin cup of coffee in his hand.

"Anything happen?"

Peters said cheerfully, "Not a peep. Those redskins are long gone."

"Yeah." Laramie accepted a cup of steaming coffee from Elizabeth and squatted down to blow on it. He watched her for a moment as she sliced salt pork into a small skillet. "Elizabeth, how much farther?"

"We'll get there tomorrow some time," she said guardedly.

He let his irritation surface. "You'd think you knew the location of a lost mine or some such!"

She flared up. "If I told you, you'd probably ride on without me, maybe even tie me up, while you brave men did the job all on your own!"

Laramie was silent. She was right. If he could find the canyon without her, he would arrange something like that. He heard footsteps and glanced around as Marshal Rigney came up. His face was scrubbed, hair slicked down, and he had shaved.

Peters answered Laramie's unspoken question. "Yes, there's a creek down there. But how the marshal could shave, I'm sure I don't know. That water is just like ice."

As Laramie made his way down the slope to the creek, the sun poked up in the east. He looked west. Yes, the Rockies were clearer this morning. He knew they'd disappear in the heat haze later in the day, but now they vaulted up like a long, jagged line of mighty cathedrals reaching into the heavens.

Laramie shucked his shirt and washed. Peters was right; the creek was icy.

After a quick breakfast they saddled and rode on before the sun had climbed very high. The country

grew more broken as the day wore on. They rode through a series of shallow valleys rich in grassland and dotted with grazing cattle. They met no one. Now and then a cowpuncher could be seen riding in the distance. The Rocky Mountains loomed ever closer.

"It's my first sight of the Rockies," Peters remarked.

"Looks like everything they say. Is there snow up there all the year round, Nelson?"

"In the high places."

"You've been up that high?"

"A couple times, hunting. Bighorn sheep."

In mid-afternoon they topped a ridge and saw a small town set in a grove of cottonwoods. Elizabeth reined in. "This is the last town before we get there. Do we stop or ride on through?"

Laramie thought about it while he rolled a cigarette. A small breeze of caution blew across his mind. Why risk it? If they could pick up a posse now . . . "I don't think it's a good idea."

Rigney challenged him. "Why not? We could all use a good night's rest in a hotel." His voice took on a sneering edge. "I'm not used to sleeping on the ground like some line rider."

Peters said easily, "A cool beer would be real good about now, Nelson."

"If you think we shouldn't . . . " Elizabeth watched him with barely concealed eagerness. "But I could certainly use a hot bath. And we'll still get to where we're going before dark tomorrow."

Outvoted, three to one. But it was Elizabeth's vote that decided him. She was, after all, a woman. He shrugged. "Why not?"

The town was little more than a wide place in the road, a straggle of buildings: a general store, livery stable, two saloons, stagecoach office. The town had no hotel, but there was a rooming house that would rent them rooms for the night and provide supper.

Ridgney disappeared as soon as the horses were stabled. Elizabeth disappeared also, happily on her way to a hot bath. Laramie and Peters had to be content with a horse-trough washing and a shave.

When they were finished, Peters said, "I'll buy the beers, Nelson. I figure I owe you a couple."

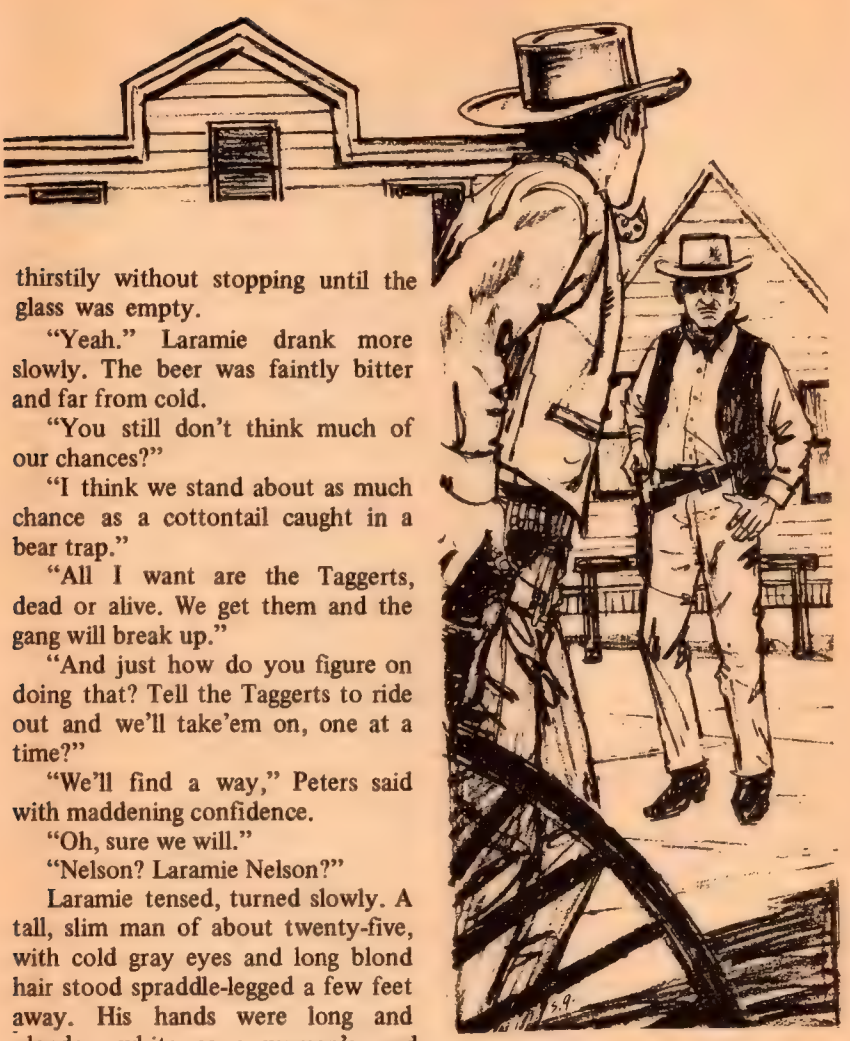
They left word they'd be back in time for supper, then walked up the street to the Watering Hole Saloon. It wasn't crowded, a half-dozen men at the bar, a lackadaisical poker game at a table in the rear. There wasn't even a dancehall girl in the place.

Peters grimaced. "Sure a busy place, this one."

"I'd guess most of their trade comes from cowhands. Town's probably treed every Saturday night."

They ordered two beers from a portly, sweating bartender.

Peters raised his beer glass. "Here's to our success." He drank



thirstily without stopping until the glass was empty.

"Yeah." Laramie drank more slowly. The beer was faintly bitter and far from cold.

"You still don't think much of our chances?"

"I think we stand about as much chance as a cottontail caught in a bear trap."

"All I want are the Taggerts, dead or alive. We get them and the gang will break up."

"And just how do you figure on doing that? Tell the Taggerts to ride out and we'll take'em on, one at a time?"

"We'll find a way," Peters said with maddening confidence.

"Oh, sure we will."

"Nelson? Laramie Nelson?"

Laramie tensed, turned slowly. A tall, slim man of about twenty-five, with cold gray eyes and long blond hair stood spraddle-legged a few feet away. His hands were long and slender, white as a woman's, and there was a worn Colt strapped low on his thigh.

A gunfighter.

Laramie sighed. "Yes, I'm Laramie Nelson."

"I've heard of you."

"Well, happy you!"

"I mean, I've heard you think you're good with that iron you're toting."

"And so?"

"So I aim to find out just how good you are. I'm calling you out, Nelson!"

VII

THE MEN AT THE bar scrambled out of the way, leaving only Brock Peters ranging alongside Laramie Nelson.

Laramie spread his hands. "Look, friend, I have no beef with you."

The gunfighter's thin lips peeled back in a wolfish grin, his right hand, fingers spread and working, hanging by his gun. "That makes no never mind. Make your play!"

A thumping sound from the bar brought Laramie's head around. The bartender, sweating heavily now, held a wicked-looking shotgun braced on the bar. "Not in here, gents. You're not going to shoot up my saloon. Outside!"

Laramie felt a spurt of relief. Maybe he wouldn't have to go through with it.

But the gunfighter laughed shortly. "That's fine with me. I'll wait for you outside in the street, Nelson."

Without hesitation he turned his back and strode out. The men inside fought for vantage points at all the front windows.

Laramie drained his glass of beer. For a moment he contemplated staying right where he was. Maybe the gunnie would give up and leave. But he knew it was a futile hope. How many times had this happened to him? Too many times, far too many.

Besides, something was nagging at him. How had the man known he was in town? He wasn't that easily recognized here.

Apparently the same thought was in Peters' mind. "How did he . . . ?"

"You tell me." Laramie thumped his glass down on the bar. "You'd better stay in here, out of the way of a stray bullet."

He started off. After a moment he heard Peters' footsteps behind him. Laramie strode on, pushing through the batwing doors. The gunfighter stood a distance up the street, his back to the sun which was low in the west.

He's not stupid, Laramie reflected wryly; he's taking every advantage open to him.

Laramie walked across the warped planks and stepped down into the dust. He risked a glance at the saloon. Peters stood just outside the doors, eyes bright and watchful.

Laramie looked at the gunman, squinting into the glare of the sun. "There's still time to call this off. I don't even know your name."

"And you're not about to live long enough to find out!"

Laramie shrugged. So be it. He considered trying for an arm or a leg, yet he knew it wouldn't do. This kind of a man was like an enraged rattlesnake. So long as he was alive and thrashing, he was deadly. Laramie stood easily, relaxed and waiting, hands hanging loosely.

Time stretched. A full minute

passed, the street silent as a graveyard.

A muscle twitched in the gunfighter's cheek, his eyes blinked rapidly, and he snarled, "Draw, damn you!"

"It's your play, friend. You call it."

The words weren't out of Laramie's mouth before the man clawed for his gun. He was fast, very fast, his gun out and coming up before Laramie's cleared the holster.

But speed wasn't as important as accuracy. Speed was often a handicap, especially when the gunman was nervous, as this one obviously was.

The Colt spat lead, and Laramie felt the bullet pluck at his sleeve in passing. Then his own gun bucked in his hand. His bullet slammed into the other man, blood immediately blossoming like a red flower over the heart. He flew backward, arms windmilling, his gun going off once more, the bullet going wild.

Laramie walked over, holstering his gun. The man was sprawled on his back, lifeless eyes staring directly into the last rays of the sun glinting off a peak far off in the distance.

They poured out of the saloon now, gathering around. People came from the other bulidings as well. Laramie saw Marshal Rigney pause on the outer fringe of the crowd without venturing closer. The marshal's gaze was on him, his eyes bleak, unreadable.

Peters crowded in. He was excited as a small boy. "He was much faster on the draw than you! And yet—"

"It isn't always the quickest. You've got to hit what you aim at," Laramie said, his glance still on Rigney. "You've been reading too many of those dime thrillers." He gestured sharply. "I think supper'll be on the table by the time we get back to the rooming house."

As they walked away, Peters said, "Is that true, it isn't always the fastest gun who wins?"

"That wasn't exactly what I said. It depends on who it is. Some, like John Wesley Hardin or Ben Thompson, were damned fast, but they were cold as ice, never got rattled, and always made that first shot count."

Nothing was said at supper about the shoot-out. Elizabeth had undoubtedly heard the shots, but shots weren't uncommon, so she would have no reason to suspect Laramie was involved in any shooting.

Her hair was tied up in a scarf, her face scrubbed until it shone. Apparently the bath had revived her good spirits, and she talked constantly as they ate. Rigney ate in his usual sullen silence. Elizabeth had never been east of the Mississippi River, and she was full of questions about the east. Brock Peters seized the opportunity and talked wittily and at length. Laramie, having come west from the southeast, knew that much of what Peters told her was an exaggeration. But Elizabeth was obviously enchanted, so Laramie didn't comment.

After supper Laramie sat on the rooming house steps and smoked a cigarette. Elizabeth joined him. "Brock told me about what happened this afternoon, Laramie."

So it was Brock now, was it? Aloud he said, "Brock has a big mouth."

"Does that happen to you often?"

"Too often." He scrubbed a hand across his mouth. "When a man gets a reputation with a gun, even a small rep, there's always some young gunnie around afire to prove himself better."

"Can't you avoid it?"

"How? I can't just turn my back and walk away. I'd never be able to hold my head up again. Stop wearing a gun? Others have gone down that road. Sooner or later they're forced to strap it on again or be shot down in the street like a dog."

Silence fell for a few moments. The house behind them had settled down for the night, creaking faintly as it cooled from the day's heat. A burst of laughter came from one of the saloons up the street. Laramie stirred restlessly and said, "Elizabeth, don't you think it's about time you told me about what's facing us tomorrow?"

She was silent for a moment more, then said in a low voice, "All right. I do know more than I told you. I was actually inside their canyon once, that time with Ned."

Laramie's breath escaped him in astonishment. "How did that happen? What were *you* doing?"

"Well, it was when we were camped out there, when Ned was trying to join up. They half-promised he could and he was happy. Happy, he was proud!" she said with a harsh laugh. "He wanted me to meet them. I didn't want to, I was scared stiff, but I thought I should have some idea of what he was getting into. I'd never met the Taggert brothers. To Ned, they were heroes, robbing the rich, land-grabbing railroads to help the poor.

"Help the poor! All they ever helped were themselves, spending their loot on whiskey and saloon women until it's all gone. They even had some fancy women with them the day I rode in there with Ned."

"That explains a few things," Laramie said slowly. "They know then that you know about their hideout?"

"Yes, they know."

"I suspected as much. And they won't rest easy so long as you're alive."

"They'd like to kill me or something worse."

"Something worse?"

"Lyle Taggert. He frightens me. He has the cold eyes of a snake. He even looks like one. He's tall and skinny. He walks, and rides, sort of bent or humped over. I understand he was shot in the back once, injuring his spine."

Laramie remembered the masked bandit, bent across his saddle at a buzzard's crooked-neck angle, riding

back to finish off Ned with a bullet.

Elizabeth was going on, "When I saw him that day, looking at me with those snake eyes, I was absolutely terrified. He undressed me with his eyes. Everyone else had a dancehall woman, even his brother, Cal, who is fat and looks like a pig and was wallowing drunkenly with one. But not Lyle. He told me he didn't care for saloon women. He likes respectable women or married women who are unhappy with their husbands. Ned had wandered off to take a drink with someone. Laramie, I just about died of shame!"

She shivered, hugging herself. "I got Ned out of there as soon as I ever could. He didn't believe me when I told him. He laughed at my fears."

"All right, Elizabeth, all right," Nelson said soothingly. He took her hand and held it tightly. "Now tell me about the canyon."

"It's a dead-end canyon, the way in very narrow and hidden by brush. It's almost like riding into a cave. Inside is a small valley, good grazing for their horses. They even have houses in there, a main house and a sort of bunkhouse. Oh, yes, they always have two men on guard at the entrance, day and night, even when they're not there."

"Then there's only the one way in and out?"

"So far as I know. And that's what Ned said they told him. But one man with a rifle could hold off an army in that narrow pass."

"How about water?"

"There's plenty, a small lake on the back slope of the canyon, fed by spring run-offs. The water's held back by a natural earth dam."

Laramie sighed. "And I suppose they always have a good supply of food on hand?"

"I even saw a small herd of beef cattle."

"You're a big help," he said glumly. "Sounds to me like they could hole up in there forever, just about. And we're supposed to somehow get them out. You think of any bright ideas, I'll be glad to listen."

"Laramie . . . I'll never get a good night's sleep again so long as the Taggerts are running loose!"

"Yeah, I know. Don't fret. We'll think of something."

She leaned close, her breath warm, and brushed her lips across his cheek. Then she was gone, running lightly into the house.

Laramie didn't make a habit of worrying. If a situation didn't offer

an immediate solution, he believed in sleeping on it. Often, a solution would come with a new day. It didn't this time. He slept very little that night. Of course, he rarely slept well in a house and on a soft bed the first night after sleeping on the trail for several days. He dropped off to sleep just before dawn without the least inkling of how they were going to lure the Taggerts out of their stronghold.

As a result, he was irritable when they rode out of town the next morning. After a few tries at conversation, Peters and Elizabeth gave up and galloped up ahead together, talking in low voices. They rode hard all morning. They were in the foothills before noon, making their way through deep draws and shallow canyons and across pinon-studded slopes. The country was beautiful, but it was wild, desolate. There were no ranches now. They saw plenty of game but little cattle.

The hard riding softened the edges of Laramie's bleak mood. He rode up beside Peters and Elizabeth. "Seems to me they could have picked a much closer place to hide out."

"They're safer out here. There's almost no law and fewer people," Elizabeth said.

"Outlaws are like animals, Nelson," Peters said. "They like to hibernate and lick their wounds far removed from people. Look at that bunch up in Jackson Hole. They had to ride a long way to their jobs, too."

Laramie looked at him curiously. "What do you know about the Jackson Hole bunch?"

"I had a hand in capturing them," Peters said with some pride.

"I thought you'd never been west before?"

"I didn't say that. You just assumed it, because I looked like an Eastern dude," Peters said with biting sarcasm.

Laramie eyed the man sourly, his irritation mounting again. Finally he said, "Yeah," and let Wingfoot fall back several paces.

It was about two hours before sundown when Elizabeth reined in, holding up a hand. When Laramie Nelson rode up alongside her, she pointed to a rise up ahead. "We'd better not get any closer. Over that hogback is a wide wash leading right up to the mouth of their canyon. The men they have posted can see us if we ride any nearer."

"Can we leave the horses here and go on foot for a looksee?"

"We can crawl up behind those bushes on top there and see all there is to see."

They tied the horses and started up the incline on foot. A few yards from the top Laramie waved them down, and they crawled the rest of the way. The brush was thick along the top of the ridge. Carefully they parted the lower branches and peered through. The wash was deep and wide, the bottom pebble-strewn; it had been scoured by a flash flood at some time or another.

Elizabeth nudged Laramie and jerked her head toward the mountains. About a mile from where they squatted, the wash veered away from a slope so steep it was almost a cliff. Pines grew thick on the slope and at one place a profusion of brush grew right down into the wash. As Laramie squinted into the sun, he glimpsed the glitter of something bright. He judged it to be a rifle barrel.

Elizabeth nudged him again. "That must be one of the guards," she wispered. "That brush you see coming all the way down, that's the way in. The bushes are so thick in there you have to lead your horse in."

"And to get out they have to ride right down that wash?" She nodded.

Laramie slid back down the slope a few yards and leaned his back against a stunted pine while he rolled a cigarette. They all gathered around him. Marshal Rigney squatted to one side, face morose, idly tossing pebbles down the slope. Peters and Elizabeth looked at Laramie expectantly, hopefully.

As though they expected him to pull a ready-made answer out of his Stetson! He wrenched it off, slapped it against his leg and said wrathfully, "If we had a posse with us, we could string everybody out on both sides of that wash and strave 'em out. If they tried to ride out, we could pick 'em off one by one."

"But we don't have a posse," Peters said calmly.

"Yeah, and without one we don't have a prayer," Laramie said quietly.

"I think we should forget the whole stupid thing," Rigney said, "and ride back to Cottonwood Springs."

Laramie glared at him. What was it about this man that rubbed him the wrong way? If one of the others had said that, Laramie knew he would have fallen over his own feet in agreeing.

"Yeah. You would say that." Nelson stood up abruptly. "Is there a decent place to camp around here?"

Elizabeth said, "Yes, a very good spot. A pine grove, a cold spring . . . where Ned and I camped when we were here."

"Then let's set it up." Laramie plunged down the slope without waiting for them.

The campsite was ideal. The tall pines grew thick, forming a sort of arbor, and it was shady. The spring bubbling up out of the ground gave them water as cold as ice, and the flow of water downhill made a small brook, spreading out into a shallow pool in a small meadow, providing good grazing for the horses. Someone had once made a crude fireplace out of stones.

Laramie didn't care to risk a shot, possibly alerting the bunch in the canyon, so they had beans and salt pork for supper instead of fresh game.

After supper they sat around the fire, and Peters and Elizabeth discussed possible ways of rooting the

Taggerts out of their hole. Rigney contributed nothing, and Laramie said very little. He listened with only a part of his mind, smoking, staring moodily into the fire.

Suddenly Peters said, " Maybe we could stampede a herd of cattle in there."

Nelson stared at him. "Now there's a great plan! First, where would you get the cattle? Have you seen any all day? I haven't. And second, you don't stampede cattle *into* a tight place. They always run for the open range. It'd take two cowpunchers to each animal and then some to drive a herd into that canyon."

"It was only an idea," Peters said.

"Some idea!" Laramie got to his feet. "I'm going to bed down before you two come up with any more ideas!"

Rigney was gone when Laramie awoke the next morning.

VIII

IT WAS SHORTLY after daylight when Laramie Nelson opened his eyes. As was his habit, he looked first for the horses and found only three.

He glanced over to where he'd seen Rigney bed down and saw he wasn't there. Elizabeth and Brock Peters were still sleeping.

Laramie put on his boots and prowled around. The marshal was gone, no doubt of it. It was getting light rapidly now. Laramie ~~serached~~ until he found the tracks of Rigney's horse. He followed on foot for a half mile. The tracks led across the ridge, down into the wash and turned west.

Rigney had ridden into the canyon.

Laramie returned to camp, routed out the others and told them what he'd found.

Peters swore without apology to Elizabeth. "He's going in to warn the Taggerts?"

"It sure looks that way," Laramie said grimly.

Elizabeth said, "I told you he'd be no good to us!"

"It looks a lttle worse than that. I'd say he's a member of the Taggert bunch. Or at least he's a paid spy for them. That would explain some things. Like who took a shot at me in Cottonwood Springs. Marshal Rigney. And I'd say he told that gunnie about me back in that town day before yesterday. He may even have hired him to gun me down."

Peters jumped up in alarm. "They may have already ridden out! We've got to—"

"Ridden out? Why? Because they're afraid of two men and a woman?" Laramie laughed shortly. "If anything, they would have sneaked in here last night and shot us in our sleep. No, they're about as worried about us as a horse would be over a pesky fly. But I reckon it'd be safe to say they now know we're here, so we'd better keep an eye peeled." He looked at each in turn. "Unless you want to give up the

whole thing now and ride out?"

They shook their heads from side to side.

Laramie sighed. "Well, it was too much to hope for, I reckon."

They found a good location about two hundred yards from the canyon entrance. Trees growing on the side of the wash and several big rocks provided good cover. Both Elizabeth and Peters were with him, and Laramie knew they would have to divide the time into shifts if they were to set up an effective vigil. Time enough for that later.

"I don't know what good it'll do anyway," he muttered. "They can stay in there until we're nothing but bleached bones out here. Or if they come boiling out, we can't hope to get them all."

"Just so we get the Taggerts, " Peters said.

"You think they'll personally lead a charge like that? Not on your life! They'll be the tail of the dog."

Peters moved restlessly. "We're not even sure they're still in there. Just because *you* think they are . . ."

Laramie squinted at the canyon entrance, his gaze raking the hillside foot by foot. He detected no movement, saw no glitter of sun on metal. Quickly he levered two random shots at the hillside. Then he stuck his sombrero on the rifle barrel and inched it up above the rock he crouched behind. Instantly a rifle shot rang out, and the hat spun around. It was impossible to tell the exact location of the rifleman.

Laramie lowered the rifle, removed the hat and ruefully poked his little finger through the neat hole.

He asked dryly, "Satisfied now?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so."

Laramie leaned back against the rock, hat slanted down over his eyes. He rolled a cigarette and smoked thoughtfully. Peters and Elizabeth moved a few feet away and began a conversation in low tones.

Laramie smoked, gazing out from under the hat brim at the dry wash bed. A nebulous thought began taking shape in his mind. It was a long shot, completely wild, but it was better than nothing. Certainly it was better than roosting here until they grew roots.

Suddenly Elizabeth was at his side, her fingers digging into his arm. She said urgently, "Laramie, look!"

Laramie peered around the boulder. A man rode toward them, carrying a white rag elevated on a stick. The rider was tall and thin, and rode hunched over.

Elizabeth confirmed what Laramie had already guessed. "It's Lyle Taggert!"

Laramie watched the man ride up, holding his rifle steady on him. Then he saw he wasn't wearing a gun, and there was no rifle in the scabbard, so Laramie lowered his weapon and stood up in full view. "You stay out of sight, Elizabeth, until we find out what he wants."

Taggert's face was very narrow, with the shape of a blunted axe blade, his nose prominent. His eyes

seemed lidless, colorless. And Elizabeth was right. Taggert had the unblinking stare of a snake.

He was dressed in a black broadcloth suit and a pleated white shirt, with a black bow tie. He was so clean-shaven that his face had the pink flush of a sunset. He could be on his way to church. Or going courting.

Taggert reined in at the bottom of the slope, In a nasal voice he said, "You're Nelson, I take it?"

"I'm Nelson."

The man nodded. "That's what Claude told me."

"Rigney's your man, then?"

"You might say that." Taggert's thin lips drew back over yellowed teeth in what could be taken for a smile. "I've rode out to parley."

"About what?"

"First, is Mrs. Cooper with you?" He held up a long-fingered hand. "Don't bother lying. Claude told me she is and we've been watching. She hasn't left."

Elizabeth stood up beside Laramie, her head held high. "Yes, I'm here."

Taggert swept off his hat, revealing a head as hairless as an egg. "Right pleased, Mrs. Cooper. I'm sorry about Ned, but those things happen.

"Yes, I'm so sure you are sorry," Elizabeth said acidly, not looking at him.

Laramie spoke, "You killed him, Taggert. I saw you."

Taggert was unruffled. "Did you, now? Well, it couldn't be helped."

"What do you want with us?"

"Well now, I could ask what *you* want here. But to tell the truth I'm glad you're here. At least I'm glad Mrs. Cooper is. Saves me a lot of trouble." He wiped sweat from his forehead with the edge of his hand and replaced his hat. "Mrs. Cooper rides back with me and I'll let you and your Pinkerton friend go without a scratch."

"So you can kill her?"

Taggert's eyes widened in an innocent look. "Kill her? Now why would I want to do that? I'm right taken with the lady and now that she's a widow, she'll be needing a man to look after her."

"I can take care of myself, thank you," Elizabeth said tartly.

"And besides," Taggert continued as though she hadn't spoken, "if we'd wanted to kill anybody, we could have done that while you were all sleeping last night. But I figured Mrs. Cooper losing her husband and all would hardly look kindly on losing her friends."

Laramie said, "You come riding out here carrying a white flag and laying down terms to *us?"*

"I didn't want to get gunned down before I said my piece. And if you think you've got us treed, think again." Taggert laughed harshly. "We can take you any old time."

"We'll get some of you."

"Maybe so, but not enough." The man's voice hardened. "Now about Mrs. Cooper . . ."

"She stays here."

"You're making a mistake. You'll all wind up buzzard meat. Play it my way and you'll all live. It's too late now for you to ride out. My boys'll be watching you and we'll ride you down if you try it."

"I'd rather be dead than live with you," Elizabeth said in a shaking voice.

"Now that ain't good sense, ma'am. I ain't all that bad." Taggert's face crinkled in what Laramie supposed was intended to be an ingratiating smile. "You'll have a good life with me. I have a fine house in there, all furnished, just waiting for a woman like you."

"Parley's over," Laramie Nelson said. He was having a hard time keeping his anger under control. "Turn your horse around and ride back."

"Now wait a minute—"

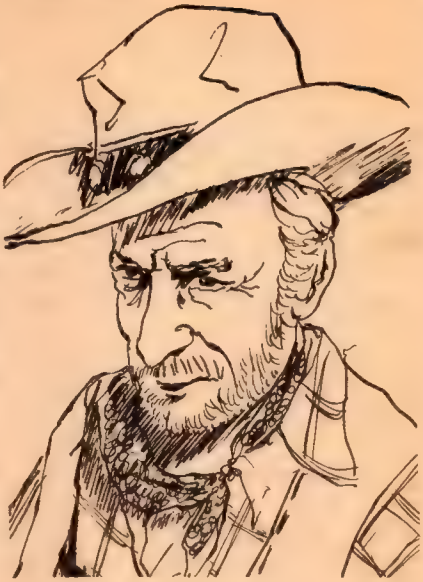
"I said ride!"

Firing from the hip, Laramie sent a rifle bullet thudding into the dirt in front of Taggert's horse. The animal reared, whinnying, pawing the air. It took Taggert a little while to get the horse under control.

When he spoke again, Taggert's voice was ugly, his eyes flat and hard. "You'll be sorry for that, sorrier than you'll ever know!"

Then he turned his horse and rode back toward the canyon at a walk.

Some time during the confrontation Brook Peters had stood up alongside Elizabeth. Now he said tightly, "I should have shot him



down like a cur. I don't know why I didn't. A dead Taggert would be better than a live one!"

"We don't do things that way out here, Peters. He came under a white flag. Besides, I'm sure they're watching. If we'd've gunned him down, the others would have been right on top of us."

"Maybe I should have gone with him," Elizabeth said miserably.

Laramie rounded on her. "Hush up with that kind of talk!"

"But it's my fault you're here, Laramie! I don't know why I ever thought the three of us could carry this off. If you're killed, I'll never forgive myself!"

"It's too late now to talk about blame. We've got to figure a way out."

"There is no way out."

IX

TWO HOURS later Laramie Nelson was hunkered down in the shade of a rock on the lip of the wash. It was edging toward noon now, the sun hotter than at any time since they'd reached the high country. Elizabeth had gone back to camp to prepare their lunch, and Brock Peters was a few yards up the wash toward the canyon, keeping watch.

In his mind Laramie had gone over and over the plan he had devised. The chances of it working depended on a number of factors, not the least of which was pure luck. He also had to gamble on the bandits being overconfident to the point of laxness in their vigilance.

He heard the scuffle of footsteps and looked around as Elizabeth slipped in beside him with a canteen of water and a plate of heated beans.

"Laramie," she said in a low, soft voice, "maybe after dark . . . couldn't we just ride off? How would they know?"

Laramie shook his head, chewing, and swallowed some water before answering. "It's too risky. They may send some scouts out after dark, looking for us to do just that. We'd be outnumbered, about five to one."

He wasn't being entirely honest. Earlier, he would have agreed with her. In the night their chances of getting away would be better than fifty-fifty, especially if they scattered, setting up a rendezvous point. But the brief encounter with Lyle Taggert had altered his thinking considerably. So long as the bandit chief was either alive or running free, Elizabeth wouldn't be safe anywhere. The very thought of Elizabeth in Taggert's clutches made Laramie's blood run cold. It had to be resolved one way or another in this place, here and now.

He said, "Tell me again about the lake and the dam."

Her gaze sharpened. "What about it?"

"Well, you said it was in the *back* of the canyon?"

"Yes. Oh, I see what you mean. Not exactly. Inside, the valley curves, running at an angle to us. Like this." Using a stick she sketched outlines of the canyon in the dirt. "You see, the lake is actually here." She drew a rough circle and jabbed it with the stick. "It should be right about here, right over that ridge."

Laramie said slowly, "That makes it a little easier."

Her face lit up. "Laramie, you have a plan!"

"Now don't get all excited," he said cautiously. "It depends on whether or not I can climb that ridge without being seen. You call it a ridge, actually it's a cliff. But a man on foot should be able to work his way up there without being spotted."

"You're not going in there alone!"

"I'm certainly not taking anyone else along. Elizabeth, it's the only way. Alone, I might have a chance. Having to watch after somebody else . . . well." He scooped the last of the beans from the plate, gave it to her, then leaned around the boulder. "Peters?"

Peters came over at a crouching run, squatting on his heels beside them.

"I'm going in, over the top," said Laramie Nelson.

The man looked baffled.

Laramie allowed himself a grin. "In my saddle bags there just happens to be half a dozen sticks of dynamite, fuses, and blasting caps."

"Dynamite," Brock Peters said unbelievingly. "Where you figuring on blasting out some stumps?"

"No—but when I was buying ammunition in Cottonwood Springs, I didn't much like the idea of coming all this way with just the guns we had, and I wished we had a troop of horse artillery coming with us. Then I saw the dynamite and caps, and figured they'd come in handy in the right kind of tight place."

"Well, looks like you're right about that, " Peters said. "But how come you didn't use it when those Indians had us pinned down?"

Laramie looked at him pityingly. "They were coming *down* on us—and before you start making yourself a bomb with this stuff, you'd best be darn sure it won't roll back on you. Not to mention that it'd be a little uncomfortable if one of them hostiles was to pick it up and throw it back. From the top of the canyon, I figure there's not much chance of *that*, anyhow."

He squinted up at the sun. "The problem is getting back out fast, in time to help out here. "It's close to noon. It'll take me at least two hours in and out."

Elizabeth said, "I don't understand, Laramie."

"I'm going to blow the dam. At least I'm going to try. It'll be like pulling the cork from a bottle. The water pouring down that canyon should panic them. I doubt there's enough water to do them any real harm, but they won't know that and they'll spook and come pouring out. But with the panic they should come out one or two at at time, not all at once. Anyway, that's what I *hope* will happen."

She clapped her hands together, her smile brilliant. "I knew you would think of something!"

"Don't get carried away," he growled. "It's a long shot, but the only one I can see." He leaned around the boulder, pointing. "Peters, you work your way across the wash and down the other side to a good spot. You go down this side, Elizabeth. I hate to do this to you, but there has to be somebody on each side of the wash. If things go well, I'll join you before they can come out in force."

"I'll manage, Laramie, don't worry."

"Worry? Why should I worry?"

he said sarcastically. He climbed to his feet. "Well, here goes nothing."

Nelson started toward the camp. He looked back once, in time to see Peters duck down into the wash and disappear from sight and Elizabeth moving carefully from rock to tree toward the canyon. He didn't feel right about placing her in jeopardy, but there was no other way. He knew she was good with a rifle, yet she *was* a woman. If she became rattled and they located and rushed her . . .

Laramie pushed the thought from his mind and continued on to the camp. He removed his boots and donned a pair of moccasins. Boots were of no use in scaling cliffs. He made two bundles of the dynamite, tying the sticks together with cord. He was particularly careful with the blasting caps, wrapping them separtely in old rags.

Then he put the two bundles of dynamite and the caps into a flour sack and tied it around his neck, letting it hang down his back. With regret he left the rifle behind, he was burdened enough as it was, and wore only the Colt.

It was a little over a mile to the bottom of the cliff. There was cover—rocks, trees, bushes—but he had to make it across open spaces here and there. He snaked along on his belly across these spaces, afraid that any sudden movement might catch the attention of the guards, his skin crawling in anticipation of the shock of a bullet. He didn't know how alert they were, but they could spot him easily if they had binoculars.

It took him an hour to reach the bottom of the cliff. The cover on the cliff was almost non-existent, a few stunted pines, no large rocks. But there was a sort of slanting chimney that had eroded out of the cliff face about a half mile from the canyon entrance. He had noticed it earlier but hadn't been able to tell how deep it was. Up close, it was about two feet deep and extended as far up as he could see. He could only hope it didn't end before he reached the top. It should hide him from prying eyes, and he could certainly come back down in a hurry, like sliding down a sled run, although it would probably be rough on the seat of his pants.

Picking his spots, Laramie started up the chimney. It was slow going. Every few yards he would lose a handhold or his foot would slip and he would slide back, small rocks cascading down with the sound of an avalanche. Each time he finally managed to stop his slide, he waited a minute, two minutes, for a shout of alarm, but he heard nothing. Long before he reached the top his nails were broken, fingers bleeding, and both knees of his trousers were torn, one knee bleeding profusely.

Trees grew thicker on the spine of the ridge. After pulling himself up the last few feet, Laramie lay for a time regaining his breath and getting his bearings. Finally he got to his feet and picked his way carefully, using the pines for cover. It was very quiet,

only the chirping of birds and the soughing of wind in the pines breaking the silence. It was less than a hundred yards to the other side of the ridge. Laramie approached cautiously and peered over the edge.

It was easy to see why the canyon was close to impregnable. Here the walls fell away steeply. Even a fly would have trouble climbing up from the floor of the valley two hundred feet below.

The valley was long and narrow and very green. Laramie saw the buildings at the far end, and a corral holding a few horses. The other horses were scattered across the valley, grazing. If he succeeded in panicking them as he hoped, most of the bandits wouldn't have time to catch their horses and would have to flee on foot.

But what pleased him even more was the lake itself. It lay, a circle of blue about a hundred yards in diameter, almost directly below him. The valley narrowed there even more, like the neck of a bottle, the earthen dam stretching from canyon wall to canyon wall.

All he needed was to be sure that his aim was good and it would be like dropping eggs.

Laramie took the dynamite and caps from the sack and arranged them on the ground. Then he rocked back on his heels, rolled a cigarette and lit it. He drew on it until the coal was burning evenly, took a deep breath and stood up with one bundle of dynamite.

The caps were attached, the fuse ready. It was time.

He started to touch the cigarette to the end of a fuse when a harsh voice said behind him, "Freeze, friend. Hold it right there!"

X

LARAMIE NELSON froze as instructed, scarcely daring to breathe. To get this close and have this happen . . . !

"All right, you can turn around now. But slow and easy. Don't make any sudden moves."

Laramie turned.

The man holding a gun on him was a big one, shoulders barndoor wide and legs like stumps, with a heavy, drooping moustache and a two-day growth of beard. His clothes were filthy, his face smeared with dirt, and even from ten feet away Laramie caught a strong whiff of a sour smell.

"Now just what are you doing here?"

Laramie's initial despair had receded, and his mind was working coolly, weighing his chances. They weren't good. Even if he could get to his gun, he couldn't risk a shot. It would alert those down below and spoil his plan. He said slowly,

"Well, that's a long story."

"First . . ." The man motioned with his gun. "Unbuckle your gunbelt and let it drop."

"You know what this is?" Laramie held the bundle of dynamite

up before him, the fuse only an inch from the burning cigarette.

Even under the dirt the big man's face paled visibly. "What the hell! Dynamite!"

Laramie nodded. "You know what will happen if I touch this cigarette to the fuse?"

"You wouldn't!"

"Try me." Laramie moved the cigarette closer. "Throw your gun away."

"You're bluffing! You'll go sky-high too, if you light that fuse!"

Laramie touched the coal to the fuse, and it began to sizzle. The other man stared in fascination and growing horror, bloodshot eyes bulging. Then, in a convulsive movement, he threw his gun away from him. Laramie pinched the burning fuse between thumb and forefinger, bent and gently placed the dynamite on the ground.

Then, straightening, he was on the big man in two strides. He slammed his fist into the other's mouth before he came out of shock. The blow sent the man crashing back into a tree. He grunted in sudden fury and swarmed at Laramie with both fists swinging wildly. Laramie absorbed a stunning blow on shoulder and turned his head aside to let the other fist whistle past. Then he closed with the man, crowding him back against the tree, pummeling the soft belly unmercifully with both hands.

Laramie hoped to put him away before he could yell a warning, but he soon realized, regretfully, that it wasn't to be. The man was soft, slow-witted, but he was bulky, strong, and could absorb a lot of punishment before going down—if Laramie could take him at all.

Laramie hit him again in the face, this time on the jaw, the blow jarring his arm all the way up to the shoulder. The other man shook his head like a wounded bear, falling back. And Laramie, as though reading the man's thoughts, knew he was about to yell his head off.

In one blurring motion Laramie drew his Colt and laid the barrel alongside the man's head. The other, mouth half-open to yell, reeled back and toppled, slowly, the strangled shout turning into a snort of pain.

He wasn't unconscious, only dazed. Working quickly, Laramie stripped him of his belt and lashed his hands together behind the tree. Then he tore a piece off the flour sack and made a gag.

There was less than an inch left of the burned fuse. Laramie quickly replaced it with a fresh one, rolled and lit another cigarette, then hurried to the edge of the canyon wall.

He lit the fuse, aimed carefully for the dam and let the bundle of dynamite go. He stooped, picked up the other one and touched the cigarette to the fuse. He heard a muffled boom and glanced over the edge. His heart sank as he saw a geyser of water settling back into the lake. He had missed the dam entirely.

He corrected his aim as best he

could and let the second bundle drop. He didn't wait around to check on his accuracy. Either he had missed the dam or he hadn't. In either case, he had to get out of there.

He was halfway to the other side of the ridge when he heard the second explosion. It was impossible to tell from the sound how successful he'd been.

Laramie made no attempt at concealment on the way down. He had to get back to Elizabeth as quickly as possible. He went down the chimney on his backside, catching at a rock or a shrub now and then and digging in his heels to slow his descent.

Halfway down, he heard gunfire, the rapid clatter of handguns and the echoing crack of rifles. He let himself go and slid down the last few feet without trying to check his fall. He hit the bottom, lost his balance and fell headlong, then was up and running, the Colt in his hand. He had about fifty yards to go to Elizabeth, and he covered them in a matter of seconds.

She was kneeling behind a rock, firing the rifle calmly, as unruffled as though baking bread. Laramie slid in beside her and raked the wash with his glance. There was about a foot of water running swiftly along the bed of the wash. Men were splashing up the channel on foot, firing at random. Laramie saw three riderless horses, three still bodies on the ground.

"We decided to get those on horseback first," Elizabeth said as though in answer to an unspoken question.

"Good thinking," Laramie said between gasping breaths. "The Taggerts or Rigney?"

"I haven't seen either. Not yet."

They were within easy range of the canyon entrance and could have picked off the men one by one as they came out. And now Laramie saw several women running out. He placed his hand on Elizabeth's arm.

"Hold up, we might hit one of the women. We want the Taggerts and Rigney. They'll be coming out soon. If some of these get away, let them" He raised his voice. "Peters?"

"Ho!"

"Hold your fire!"

After a brief pause Peters replied, "All right, Nelson."

"Laramie!" Elizabeth cried. She pointed. "Cal Taggert!"

Riding bareback on a big palomino, heels thumping the animal's sides furiously, was a short, plump man, wearing nothing but pants and boots and carrying a six-gun in his free hand.

"He's mine! I'll take him!"

Laramie glanced across the wash in time to see Brock Peters leave his cover and plunge halfway down the slope.

"The idiot!" Laramie thought aloud. "Who does he think he is, Wild Bill Hickok?"

He swiveled his head and saw that Cal Taggert had spotted Peters. He began firing, but his bareback perch on a running horse was too pre-

carious for any kind of accuracy.

Peters stood patiently, ignoring the bullets whistling around him as though they represented no more of a threat than buzzing hornets. Slowly he raised the Winchester to his shoulder and waited until Cal Taggert was almost abreast of him before he fired once. Cal Taggert flew off the palomino. The horse raced on, but Cal Taggert lay still, the water swirling around him turning pink from his blood.

Laramie noticed, without giving much thought to it, that the level of the water was falling. The lake must be close to empty.

The sound of another shot jolted him. He looked again at Peters and saw him totter and fall, clutching his shoulder. He rolled down the slope and splashed into the water.

"It's Lyle Taggert!" Elizabeth cried.

Laramie glanced up the wash and saw Lyle Taggert riding hard on the big black horse. He was fully dressed, all in black, and Laramie thought of a vulture swooping in to feed on a carcass.

Rage flooded Laramie. If Taggert's shot had killed Peters . . .

He stepped out in full view and called out in a loud voice, "Over here, Taggert!"

Although raging, his mind was cold and clear, and a tiny part of it jeered at him. He was being as much a show-off as Peters. This man, this Taggert, with the snake eyes and the buzzard stoop, was deadly and could better have been shot from ambush and without pangs of conscience.

As these thoughts sped through his mind, Laramie Nelson saw Taggert's head turn, saw the black horse veer and head straight for him.

Laramie stood tall, feet planted firmly, waiting. He waited until Taggert got off a shot, the bullet pinging off the rock by Laramie's shoulder. He waited until the rider was close enough for Laramie to see the wolfish grin.

Then he drew and fired. His shot sounded an instant before Taggert's second. Taggert lurched in the saddle, and the black horse reared high, but Taggert stayed in the saddle. At the same time Laramie felt a streak of fire brand his right thigh and his feet went out from under him. Falling, he fired again. He tumbled over and over, finally ending up at the bottom of the wash. The thirsty earth had soaked up all the water now, leaving a scum of mud.

Laramie raised himself on his elbows. He had lost his gun on the way down. He steeled himself for the shock of another bullet. But it was all right. He saw the black horse, riderless, standing a few yards away, nuzzling the still figure of Lyle Taggert on the ground.

Then Elizabeth was there, all concern. "Laramie! Are you hurt bad?"

He examined his thigh. "It's nothing, a scratch."

With her help he got to his feet, took a couple of tentative steps. It would soon stiffen up, but he could

walk all right. He nodded across the wash. "I'm all right, you'd better check on Peters."

Elizabeth uttered an exclamation and hurried away. Laramie looked around. As suddenly as it had begun, it was all over. There were a few horses milling about aimlessly, but the men were all gone. Up toward the canyon entrance was a huddle of women looking his way, plainly frightened.

That was going to be something of a problem, herding a bunch of scared dancehall girls back to the nearest town.

Laramie searched around for his Colt, found it and holstered it, then limped across to where Elizabeth was tending Peters.

The Pinkerton man was sitting up, in the act of lighting a small cigar. Elizabeth had his shirt stripped away from his shoulder and was sponging up blood with a handkerchief.

Laramie squatted down beside them. "Is it bad?"

Peters exhaled a cloud of smoke with a gusty sigh. "A flesh wound. I think the bullet went clean through. Soon as it's bandaged, I'll be fine. Say, we did it, didn't we?" He was exuberant. "It's all over!"

Laramie started to nod, then remembered. His face hardened. "Not quite. There's one more to go. Rigney. He has to still be in the canyon."

Peters shrugged. "The hell with him. The Taggerts were the important ones."

"He's important to me. He tried to get me killed. Twice. I owe him for that. And if there's anything I hate, it's a crooked lawman."

He stood up and started to limp away.

Elizabeth turned a stricken face up to him. "You're not going in there alone?"

"Alone." He grinned sardonically. "Like Peters said, this one is mine."

XI

IF HE HADN'T known where to look, Laramie Nelson could have walked within six feet of the canyon entrance and never have seen it.

He pushed his way through thick bushes, thorns plucking at his clothing. He reflected that he'd certainly need new duds after it was all over. His shirt was ripped in several places, his trousers practically in shreds.

The narrow canyon walls pinched together overhead, and it was almost

like entering a cave. It must be a real job forcing a horse through, he thought.

After about thirty yards the opening widened, and he stepped cautiously out into the valley. The main house and the bunkhouse were about fifty yards from the entrance. There wasn't a soul in sight, only a few horses and several head of cattle.

He was fairly sure Rigney was lurking somewhere about, probably in the main house and probably watching him, and there wasn't a bit of cover between where he was and the house.

He had a choice of either going ahead or turning back. He started toward the house, limping more noticeably now, every sense alert. The ground was spongy, muddy where the water had soaked in. He could see the dam at the far end of the canyon, a great gap blown in it.

He had covered over half of the distance to the house when he heard the crash of glass as a window smashed outward and saw a gun barrel poke through.

Laramie threw himself down and to one side an instant before the gun spat at him. He rolled over twice and came to his feet. He got off two quick shots at the window, then went in a crouching, zigzag run toward the corner of the house, ignoring as best he could the pain in his thigh. The man in the house managed two more shots, but Laramie made it to the house safely.

It was a log structure, but quite large, two stories, and very well-constructed.

There was only one window in the side of the house where he flattened himself out. While he got his breath back, Laramie quickly reloaded the Colt. He saw that the floodwater had risen about two feet up the side of the house.

He shouted, "Rigney? Throw your gun out and come on out. You backed the wrong hand and you've lost the game."

"Go to hell!"

"Don't be a fool! There have been enough killings."

"You want me, come in and get me. But you'd better come shooting!"

Laramie sighed and hunkered down with his back against the wall. Let the marshal sweat a little. Let him wait and wonder until he was jumpy as a cat on a hot stove lid. Then would be the time to go in.

The minutes dragged. Laramie yearned for a cigarette but that might give his position away. More time passed, a quarter hour. Laramie squatted with the patience of an Indian.

Finally, from inside, came Rigney's outraged roar, "Damn you, Nelson! Where are you? Come on!"

Laramie smiled slightly, but he didn't move.

Then he heard the sounds of furniture being kicked over. Window glass shattered, and Rigney fired at random through the broken windows, going all the way around the

large house. Laramie waited quietly.

Then it was quiet again, and Laramie made his move. He went down the side of the building, ducking under the window. There should be a door on the back side of the house.

There was.

Laramie inched along, back to the wall, until he reached the door. He tested the knob. It was unlocked.

It had the smell of a trap.

He had a sudden, vivid picture of Rigney inside, waiting, desperate—crazed into a kind of courage by the shattering of all his plans . . . .

He hesitated for a moment more, then drew his gun, turned the knob with his left hand and sent the door crashing in with a hard kick. He was inside the door in two strides, leaping to one side, his back flush against the wall.

He had steeled himself for the blast of a gunshot, but nothing happened. After a little the silence became slightly unnerving.

He stood where he was until his eyes became accustomed to the dimness, his gaze probing every foot of the room. Furniture was overturned and shards of glass glinted on the floor like icicles. Rigney had been as wantonly destructive as a child throwing a tantrum.

Laramie advanced warily into the room. There were several doors opening off the main room, all closed, and a staircase leading up.

He heard a small sound overhead and realized his mistake, almost too late. He whirled, crouching, as a gun roared loud in the room. Splinters flew up from the floor at his feet. The stairs led up to a small balcony. The bedrooms were probably up there.

Rigney was crouched behind a balcony post, only his gun and part of his arm visible. Laramine snapped off a quick shot and saw a chip fly from the post. Rigney also fired again but he was shooting blind and the bullet went wild.

Laramie steadied his aim and fired his second shot. Rigney screamed like a woman in agony, his gun thudding to the floor. He staggered out from behind the post and leaned over the balcony rail, clutching his arm, which dripped blood on the floor below.

Laramie gestured with the Colt and said quietly, "We'll ride back to Cottonwood Springs and tell the good people there what you've been up to."

XII

TWO HOURS later they broke camp and rode out. They had found a buckboard hidden in a side canyon. The saloon women had been loaded onto the buckboard and now led the procession. Close behind them rode Rigney, the man Laramie Nelson had tied to the tree on top of the ridge and one other man they had found wandering around. The three men had their hands lashed to their saddlehorns. The others had all

vanished. The bodies of both Taggerts were draped over their horses, the other dead bandits buried back in the wash.

Laramie and Brook Peters brought up the rear. Elizabeth was riding alongside the buckboard, deep in conversation with the women, something that both surprised and pleased Laramie. It was rare indeed that a *nice* woman in this part of the country would admit that dancehall girls even existed, much less talk to them.

"We look like the walking wounded left over from an Indian massacre," Peters said with a laugh.

"Yeah, we do at that."

Laramie wore the same torn garments; he hadn't brought extra ones along on the trip. In addition to the other rips and tears, his trousers were split where Elizabeth had bandaged the thigh wound. And she had torn away most of Peters' shirt to bandage his shoulder and had placed his arm in a crude sling. The round hat had been crushed some time during the melee and would never be the same again. Yet it was perched on the man's head at the usual cocky angle, and a slim cigar fumed between his lips.

Only Elizabeth looked reasonably presentable. Somehow she'd found time to scrub her face and hands and remove most of the dust from her clothes.

"Laramie, I want to thank you for helping out, especially since you didn't want to come along," Peters said. "It would have been a different story without you."

Laramie glanced at him in surprise. It was the first time the Pinkerton man had called him by his first name. "I told you, I didn't do it for—"

"I know, I know, you did it for Eliza— for Mrs. Cooper." Peters gestured impatiently with his cigar. "All the same . . ."

They rode in silence for another mile. Laramie saw Elizabeth glance back at them and pull her horse in to wait for them.

Peters said, "What now, Laramie?"

"I haven't thought much about it." Laramie shrugged. "Something will come along. It always does."

"The agency could use a man like you. We're always short of good men."

"A Pinkerton agent?" Laramie scrubbed a hand across his mouth. "I don't know—"

"The pay is good, you're pretty much your own boss as long as you do your job." They were close to Elizabeth now, and Peters spoke rapidly. "It's exciting work—"

"Yeah, I can see that."

"—and it's worthwhile. Will you think about it? I can put in a good word for you. In fact, I think I can promise you a spot if you want it."

"Well, sure, I'll think about it."

They were even with Elizabeth now. Peters clucked to his horse and rode on ahead.

Elizabeth said curiously, "What

was that all about, Laramie? Think about what?"

"I was just offered a job with the Pinkertons."

"You? A Pinkerton agent?" she said in quick dismay. Then, as he scowled around at her, she added hastily, "I don't mean you wouldn't make a good one. But I was hoping you'd stay around."

"Why?"

"Well . . ." She was flustered and refused to meet his gaze. "I thought we . . ."

"Elizabeth," he said gently, "you've just lost a husband. It's not the right time for us to think about the future."

"Then you're going to take Brock's offer?"

"I think so." And even as he spoke, Laramie knew he would. The prospect excited him. This could be the life he'd been looking for since he'd left Spanish Peaks.

"I'll never see you again!"

"Now I didn't say that, did I? I'll be riding back this way again some time. Brock said a Pinkerton man travels all over."

They rode for a little without speaking, Elizabeth with her back held ramrod-straight, staring straight ahead.

Then Laramie asked, "What will you do, Elizabeth? Stay in Cottonwood Springs?"

"No, I'll go to Dodge. I can get a job there," she said evenly. Then she relented slightly. "Don't worry about me, Laramie. I'll be fine."

"Sure you will." He reached across to touch her arm. "Sure you will."

Elizabeth raised his hand to her lips, briefly, then let it fall and drummed her heels against her mount and sent him surging ahead until she was riding alongside Brock Peters.

Laramie watched her with a sense of melancholy, yet it wasn't very deep, and he knew it wouldn't last.

He would be back. He would see her again. Something might develop between them. Or it might not. That was in the future. Now was now, he wasn't ready to settle down, and there was the prospect of a new and exciting job before him.

He stood up in the stirrups, stretching. He was sore from head to toe, but it had been a good day, all things considered, and there would be other good days.

Laramie Nelson looped the reins around the saddlehorn, rolled and lit a cigarette, then spoke to Wingfoot and rode at a lope to catch up to Elizabeth and Brock Peters.

THE ONLY MAGAZINE featuring ZANE GREY every month

A QUESTION OF FAITH

by CLAY RINGOLD

MID-JULY OF 1864. . . . The afternoon heat of New Mexico lay across the broad, dry plains and choppy hills in a blistering haze. Nothing moved but vagrant dust-devils and the stagecoach bound for Rinconada.

Driver Luke Colegrove flung a sidwards glance to Ed Drummond, beside him on the box. "See anything?"

Drummond again swept the savage terrain with his keen scrutiny. "Nope – nothin'. You figure Cannon knowed what he was talkin' about? Never heard of Quantrell's bunch this far west before."

Colegrove, an acid little man with hawk-like features and a straggling yellow moustache, said. "He knowed. Them guerrillas been stopping coaches all over the country, hunting them two women."

Drummond digested that in silence. Then: "Figure to tell the passengers? Bound to throw a powerful hard scare into most of them."

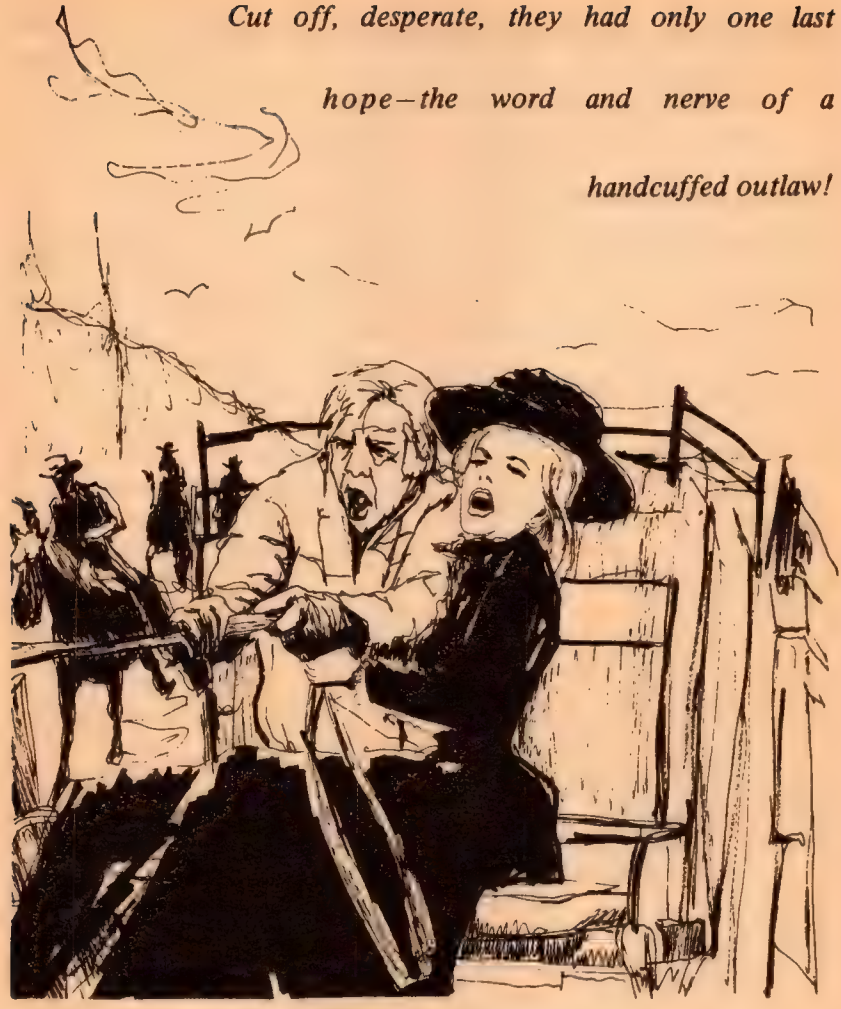
"They got a right to know. We get to Cook's, I'll speak my piece. You do some talking to that hostler. See if he's seen any signs of them. Was ten, maybe twelve in the bunch. Cannon wasn't sure."

Thirty minutes later they rushed into Cook's Station, rolling the dust ahead of them in a great, yellow boil, and came to a sliding stop. Luke Colegrove swung down, yanked open the coach door.

"Ten minutes, folks. Stretch your legs and get yourself a swallow of water." He wheeled away, entered the low-roofed adobe hut where further refreshments were to be had.

The passengers began to crawl stiffly from the cramped confines of the stage into the glaring sunlight. First, Mrs. Russell, a plump, gray-haired woman, the wife of a Territorial delegate. Next came her daughter, Martha just turned seventeen. She was pretty, blue-eyed and

Cut off, desperate, they had only one last hope—the word and nerve of a handcuffed outlaw!



filled out her stylishly cut traveling suit to perfection. On their way to visit relative in Silver City, it was said.

Third fare was a portly cattleman from Las Vegas. Armstrong by name, he was prone to much dozing, and, when awake, fiddled constantly with a gold toothpick on a chain.

The fourth was Dave Kirby.

Barely in his twenties, with a rashness on his features, a caged wildness glowing in his eyes. Handcuffs linked his wrists. His journey would end at Rinconada where he would stand trail for murder. He halted, leaned against the rear wheel of the vehicle as he awaited the lean-galled, lanky man who followed close on his heels.

He was John Prince, marshal of Springville, in the process of delivering the prisoner. When he placed his narrow glance on Dave Kirby, anger stirred within him.

Kirby had been present during that hour before the stage left Springville. He had witnessed the stormy scene, heard the bitter words that had passed between the tall lawman and his wife, Kate. Jealousy in a man is a pitiless scourge, forcing the worst to the surface—and the soul of John Prince had been laid bare before the outlaw.

Colegrove appeared, wiping at his mouth with the back of a hand. He glanced at Drummond, in conversation with the hostler, halted, brushed his sweat-stained hat to the back of his head.

"Folks, something I reckon I'd better tell you. Appears we're in for a mite of trouble."

John Prince swore softly under his breath. He'd hoped to deliver Kirby and return quickly to Springville. The thought of Kate alone—with time on her hands—with Wilson Coyle subtly pressing his flattery and attentions upon her, gouged into him like a saw-edged blade. He had not wanted to make the trip to Rinconada in the first place, but there'd been no choice. Now it appeared something was coming up that would keep him away even longer.

Resentment sharpened his tone. "Now, why—"

"Guerrillas," Colegrove spat. "Part of Quantrell's bunch. Been stopping stages on this road last few days."

"Quantrell?" Armstrong echoed in frank disbelief. "This far west?"

The old driver shrugged. "Been spotted east of here. And in Texas. Just about everywhere, in fact."

John Prince said: "You carrying a money shipment?"

Colegrove wagged his head. "Only a smidgin of mail."

"Then why," Mrs. Russell said, dabbing at the patches of sweat on her face with a lace handkerchief, "would they want to bother us?"

Colegrove looked directly at the woman, his beaten features solemn. "Reckon it's you they're wanting, ma'am. You and your daughter."

Mrs. Russell caught her breath. The handkerchief went to her lips to stifle a cry. Instantly Martha placed her arm around her mother's shoulders. She stared at Colegrove.

"Why—why us?"

"Your daddy's a big man in this here country. Was I guessing, I'd say they figured to hold you for ransom."

John Prince turned angrily to the stagecoach driver. "Why the hell

didn't you say something about this back at the Fort? Could've asked for a cavalry escort."

Colegrove spat into the dust. "Didn't know about it. Just got the word at the last stop. Anyway," he added, glancing over the party, "I expect there's enough of us to give them an argument, if they try stopping us."

Prince allowed his jaundiced gaze to travel over the group. Enough—hell! Two women, an outlaw a man couldn't trust beyond arm's length, and a fat cow-nurse who'd likely curl up on the floor at the first shot. Only Drummond, the shotgun rider, might be relied upon for help—and if the raiders were smart, they'd shoot him off the box at the start. Far as Colegrove was concerned, he could be counted out of it; he'd have his hands full with the team.

Mrs. Russell began to weep raggedly. Martha drew her closer, patting her arm gently. Colegrove bit a fresh chew of tobacco.

"Right sorry I had to tell you all this, but I figured you ought to know. Now, everybody get aboard. Let's get moving."

As the stage lurched along, each passenger was wrapped deeply in his own thoughts. John Prince was thinking of his seven years of married life with Kate, who had grown more beautiful as time went by. Once he had been proud of her beauty, was complimented that she was the target for other men's eyes. Now it was a red-hot iron searing through his chest. How had that come to be? When had it begun?

Somewhere, sometime. . . . One day Kate and he were happy, loving in a comfortable, satisfying way; and then the next there had been change. There was difference between them, a sullen anger, a wariness and suspicion that fattened on the hours while they were apart.

Wilson Coyle, that old friend of bygone years, had much to do with it, Prince was sure. Not that he knew anything of certainty, it was simply—well, the way things looked, sounded. And in his profession he had learned to have little faith in mankind, and always expect the worst.

The sudden shouts of Luke Colegrove lifted and the coach began to pitch and sway with greater intensity. Armstrong thrust his head through the window, made his absent survey and murmured: "Coming into the hills," and settled back. Prince glanced through the opening, saw the flat country swelling gradually into definite knolls that grew larger in the distance.

The stage began to climb a long grade. Frowning red buttes closed in on either side and suddenly they were in a narrow channel. *Good place for an ambush,* John Prince thought.

The coach began to slow as the drag of the grade took its toll of the horse's speed. Colegrove's yells increased, well interspersed with profanity, but they were drawing near a

crest as the diminishing height of the buttes indicated.

Suddenly they were on the summit, wheeling around a sharp bend and picking up speed. Unexpectedly they began to slow. Ed Drummond shouted something unintelligible. Immediately following there came the sharp, spiteful crack of his rifle. Prince stiffened, drew his revolver, and twisted about to peer through the window. A dozen yards ahead a scatter of riders milled about on the road, blocking their passage.

"I'm going through 'em!" Luke Colegrove yelled, and began to ply the whip. "Hang on!"

Prince threw a quick glance to Armstrong, and was surprised to see the big man draw his long-barreled pistol and rest it upon the window sill. He looked then to the girl.

"Down on the floor—quick!"

She obeyed instantly. The lawman motioned Kirby to her vacated seat. Now the girl was below them, protected by their legs while Mrs. Russell was sandwiched securely between Armstrong and Dave Kirby. Prince had the rear seat to himself, enabling him to slide back and forth and watch both sides of the road.

Ed Drummond's rifle cracked again; answering shots came from the road. The coach began to sway and red dust choked them. Prince cast a calculating look at Mrs. Russell. She would be breaking down, going to pieces any moment now, and they'd have more problems. He'd order Kirby to look after her, keep her out of sight and quiet if things break.

Reaching inside his coat, he drew a second pistol, the one he'd taken from Dave Kirby and now evidence in the pending case, laid it on the seat.

"Could give you a hand," the outlaw said.

Prince shrugged. "No, thanks."

"My neck, too," Kirby said.

"But my responsibility," the lawman replied.

Drummond's firing continued and now Armstrong began to lay down his shots as they drew abreast of the raiders. The acrid smell of powder smoke filled the coach, overriding the dust, and Colegrove's shouts began to mingle with others coming from the road. Bullets began to thud into the coach, dimpling the paneling. Armstrong jumped when one splintered the wood above his head.

They reeled through the cluster of waiting riders, two of whom were falling slowly from their saddles. A dark-whiskered man wearing a faded forage cap swerved in close, mouth open in a wild yell. Prince took deliberate aim, pressed off his shot. The man jolted, wilted, fell. Ed Drummond's rifle had gone silent; the lawman looked back. The guard was a crumpled bundle of dusty clothing in the road

Prince swore silently. Armstrong —and him. That was it, now. Another guerrilla hove into view alongside, lips curled into a grin as he aimed a bullet at the rancher. Prince fired at point-blank range. The raider threw

up his arms, slid from his running horse.

Armstrong triggered his weapon with cool regularity, pausing only to reload. Prince guessed he'd figured him wrong. Mrs. Russell, too. She was a huddled, silent shape between the cattleman and Kirby. He glanced to the girl. Her face had paled but when she saw him looking she smiled faintly.

Shots from the guerrillas had slackened. They were behind the coach now, on the road, regrouping. Colegrove's unexpected decision to barrel straight through them had thrown them off balance. But it would be for only a few moments; already they were beginning to give chase.

Prince made a hasty calculation. Still a dozen or more in the raiding party. He and Armstrong could not hope to hold them off for long. He thrust his head through the window, looked beyond the wildly running team. A distance to the right he saw a low structure standing near the road.

"That place—" he yelled at Colegrove. "What is it?"

"Pankey's Ranch. Deserted—not much—"

"Pull in!" the lawman shouted above the hammering of the horses. "Fort up—our only chance!"

Colegrove bobbed his head in agreement. The team was running free on the downgrade and brake blocks now began to whine, go silent, whine again as the old driver alternately applied and released them to control the swaying vehicle.

Back on the seat Prince faced the others. "We're pulling off, going to hole up in an old ranch house. Be ready to jump and run for it when I give the word."

He waited for reaction—some pointless protest from Mrs. Russell, a complaint from Armstrong, a note of despair from the girl. None came. Dave Kirby lifted his chained wrists.

"Take these off, Marshal—and give me my gun. I'll help."

Prince grunted. "Forget it. All you need do is run for the door of that house when I tell you."

Prince looked through the window. The ranch house was just

ahead. He turned then to the road. The guerrillas were curving in toward them, beginning to shoot again. Colegrove yelled something and the coach began to slide, skidding in close to the building.

"Now!" Prince cried, flung the door open and leaped out. He dropped to one knee and began to fire at the oncoming horsemen, conscious of the other passengers streaming by him.

He looked over his shoulder. The two women and Armstrong were already inside the adobe-walled hut. Kirby was standing in the doorway. At once the lawman began to back toward the structure, shooting steadily with both pistols at the raiders.

"Colegrove!" he yelled. "Come on—inside!"

Leaden slugs were thudding into the thick wall behind him, into the wood of the coach, kicking up dust around his feet.

"Colegrove!" he shouted again.

He gained the doorway, saw then that Colegrove could not hear. The driver lay half off the coach seat, head hanging, a broad circle of red staining his shirt front.

Prince took a long step. He felt the solid smash of a bullet as it drove into his thigh. It spun him around. Instantly he felt Kirby's hands grab him and drag him into the shadowy interior of the house. Angered, he shook off the outlaw, booted the door shut and dropped the bar into place. In that identical instant he heard the pound of hooves and a surge of yells as the riders thundered into the yard. It had been close.

He wheeled, ignoring pain, knowing exactly what must be done—the other door barricaded, the wooden shutters closed and secured. Surprise ran through him when he saw that Armstrong and the women had already performed those vital chores, and there was for John Prince a brief moment of wonder at his bitter judgment of his fellow passengers.

"You've been hit!" Mrs. Russell exclaimed, hurrying toward him.

"Nothing serious," the lawman snapped, and moved to one of the front windows. He peered through a crack. "They'll be rushing us, but it won't be long 'til dark. If we can hold them off that long, like as not they'll give up and wait for morning."

Armstrong said, "Right," in a businesslike way. "I'll take the other door."

The house, a squat one-room affair evidently had been built for just such a critical moment, except the owner would have had Indian attacks in mind. At each of the two doors and windows were small, round ports, blocked now by bags filled with sand. Prince pulled the bags away, looked again into the yard. The guerrillas had withdrawn fifty yards or so. They were in the process of bringing up a log they'd obtained from one of the decaying corrals.

"Armstrong," Prince called without turning. "They're aiming to ram

the door, break it in. Get up here and cover this other port."

The cattleman crossed the room quickly, stationed himself at the small opening.

There was a sudden flurry of covering gunshots, the sound of bullets driving into the adobe bricks. A chorus of wild yells lifted and then a half a dozen men, supporting the log between them, rushed for the door.

Cool, Prince said, "Take the lead man on the right. I'll handle the left. Don't miss."

He waited until the guerrillas were not more than ten paces away, fired. His target was a squat, dark-faced man wearing an ill-assorted uniform of both armies. The raider halted abruptly, fell. A step behind him the one singled out by Armstrong, hands clawing at his chest, was sinking to the ground. The remaining men, stalled by surprise, dropped the log and fled. Prince felled a third as they turned tail.

He was aware then of Mrs. Russell kneeling at his side. She had a strip of white cloth, probably ripped from her petticoat, draped across her shoulder and a knife in her hand. Deftly, she slit the leg of his trousers.

"Never mind," he said, and tried to move away.

"Stand still," she replied sternly. "You're losing too much blood."

He looked down at her. Kate was like that, a little bossy when need be—and when it mattered to her. Armstrong's voice caught his attention, brought him back to reality.

"Stopped 'em cold. Fact is, couple of them are pulling out."

Prince glanced through his port. "Going for the rest of their bunch, I suspect. Seems we're going to be encircled. Means they aim to pin us down for the night."

"Be dark soon," Armstrong commented. "Like you said."

Mrs. Russell, her job completed, stepped back. Prince shifted his weight to the injured leg. It was paining considerable now, and getting stiff. It would be giving him hell later.

The acrid smoke was clearing from the room. Martha Russell turned to the cattleman. "When the stage doesn't arrive at the next station, will they send somebody to find why?"

"Hard to say," the cattleman answered. "Only one stop between here and Silver City, and that's a team change. This run's a bit irregular. Not apt to start thinking about it until noon, maybe even later."

Prince was counting his ammunition. He glanced at Armstrong. "How many bullets you got?"

"Four rounds. You?"

"Dozen or so. Don't think we can depend on that bunch out there not making another try before morning. Best we stand watch at all four sides." He pivoted awkwardly, momentarily forgetting his injured leg, to Mrs. Russell. "You shoot a pistol?"

"A little—I'm not sure."

From the depths of their murky quarters Dave Kirby spoke up. "Better give me that gun, Marshal."

"We'll get along without your help," the lawman answered.

"I don't know about that" Armstrong broke in doubtfully. "Ought to have a man, good with a gun, helping—"

"No prisoner of mine gets his hands on a weapon," Prince stated flatly. "I'll accept no help from one, either."

Mrs. Russell sighed audibly. "You're a foolish man. And one who's never learned the meaning of trust—or faith."

"You're figuring him right, ma'am," Kirby said, a thread of amusement in his voice. "He don't believe in nobody but himself—not even his own wife."

John Prince stiffened in the darkness. "That way a man never gets hurt," he said. "How about taking your stations?"

The minutes wore on, dragged into an hour and night's chill settled over the room. Outside a half a dozen small fires marked the positions of the raiders ringing the structure. Prince thought of Kate, wondered what she was doing at that moment. Immediately that sharp uneasiness began to gnaw at him. Was she with Wilson Coyle? Maybe with some other man he wasn't even aware of? And then another thought reached him. Perhaps it would all end here. Perhaps the raiders would settle the whole problem for him—for her.

"Got any ideas what you'll be doing come the morning?" Dave Kirby asked, breaking the hush. "You got maybe fifteen bullets, Marshal. How long you figure you can stand off that bunch?"

"Long enough."

"For what? They hit us from all four sides at once and the ball will be over—for sure if they've got help coming."

Armstrong's voice showed interest. "You got something in mind?"

Kirby said: "Was I to get out of here and find me a horse, I could leg it for the next station, stir up a posse—maybe soliders, even. They'd be here by sunrise."

"Could at that," Armstrong said. "Where'd you get a horse? Them raiders won't—"

"Take one of the coach team. Still standing out there in front. What do you say, Marshal? Don't care nothing about myself, or you either, for that matter, but I sure hate to think of what'll happen to these ladies."

Prince sagged against the wall, took the weight off his injured leg. "You'd try anything to keep from facing that judge in Rinconada," he said in a dry, sarcastic voice. "Well, you're not fooling me. Once you went through that door, you'd line out straight for Mexico."

"Figured you'd be thinking that," the outlaw said, "only you're plumb wrong. I can make it past them ridgerunners out there. You got my

word I'll be waiting at the station for you."

Prince snorted. "Your word! Forget it, mister. I wouldn't trust you—" He stopped, feeling the hard circle of a gun's muzzle pressing into his ribs.

"I'm sorry." Mrs. Russell's voice, calm and confident, reached him. "I believe him. Make no mistake," she added quickly and prodded harder with the weapon as the lawman stirred. "I know enough about this weapon to pull the trigger—and this close I couldn't miss! At this moment I'm a desperate woman—a mother, and I'll do anything to keep my daughter from falling into the hands of those—those beasts out there. If Mr. Kirby is willing to risk his life for us, I say we let him do so."

"You're a fool, " Prince said in deep disgust. "He won't go for help. He's not interested in anything except a chance to get where the law can't touch him."

"I don't think so," the woman replied firmly. "Maybe it's your profession that's turned you hard—hard and bitter—and made you forget that there's usually some good in the worst of us."

"Usually, but not in this case," Prince said dryly. "Armstrong?"

"I agree with the lady," the cattleman said. "Our only chance."

"You saying you believe he'll do what he claims?"

"I'm willing to gamble on it. Comes a time, Marshal, when you've got to trust somebody. Man can't go

forever depending on himself. It's a question of having faith."

"Faith!" John Prince echoed scornfully, his thoughts, oddly, swinging to Kate. There was no value in faith, no substance—just as there was none in trust. Believe in either and a man found only heartbreak and disillusionment. Had he not learned that he hard way? Perhaps he had no real proof concerning Kate, but signs were all there.

"Just you stand easy," Armstrong said. "I'll be getting the keys for them handcuffs."

John Prince offered no resistance. He stood aside, watched them release Kirby, saw Mrs. Russell pass her gun to him, heard Armstrong murmur,

"Good luck, boy," and then his prisoner was slipping through the door.

THE LONG NIGHT was finally over. The first flare of light began to spread across the plains and the shadows took on form. The two women, pale and worn from their vigilance, turned from the window ports. Armstrong forsook the rear door, noting that the encirclement had been withdrawn from around the shack. He stooped, peered through one of the front openings.

"About twice as many of them out there now," he said wearily. "Seems they've rousted out the head man."

Leg paining him intensely, Prince turned, glanced through his port. A lean man in a gray Confederate army uniform was in the center of the guerrilla party. He appeared to be outlining a plan to his followers.

"Looks like the boy got away," Armstrong commented. "Lead team horse is gone and there ain't no bodies except them three we cut down yesterday laying out there."

"He made it," Prince said. "Has that kind of luck. Right now I'd say he was about halfway to the border." He paused, squinted into the glare. "Get yourself set. They're going to hit us. Don't waste no lead. We've only got—"

His words broke off. Faintly, riding the cold, clear air of the early morning, the notes of a bugle carried to him. Prince, disbelief covering his face, turned to Armstrong, then to Mrs. Russell—to Martha. The sound grew louder, closer. Abruptly guns began to crackle.

There was a quick rush of pounding hooves, and through the port Prince saw a line of blue-clad riders, some with sabers flashing, sweep into the yard. More gunfire crashed. Two of the cavalrymen spilled from their horses, a half a dozen guerrillas went down, others raced for their mounts. The line of blue swerved, gave chase.

"He did it!" Armstrong yelled happily, struggling with the bar that locked the door. "By heaven, the boy did it!"

John Prince shook his head. "Doubt that. Expect those soldiers were just riding by—happened to spot—"

But the others were hurrying through the open door, smiling laughing, grateful for their rescue, for the warming sun. The cavalry came into view again, a portion of it swinging on westward, a smaller detail cutting away, slanting toward the stranded stagecoach and its passengers.

A waxen-moustached major with a round, sunburned face came in ahead of his men, slowed, his eyes on the coach team. "Corporal Hays!" he barked. "Catch up one of those stray mounts and hitch him into harness so these people can continue on their journey."

The officer moved in nearer to the house, halted. He saluted gravely, said, "Major Amos Allingham, at

your service. We'll have you ready to move out in a few minutes. Pleased to see none of you has been seriously injured."

Allingham hesitated, looked over his shoulder to where three of his yellowlegs were getting the coach ready. A smile pulled at his lips. "Want to thank you for dispatching that young cowboy to us. We've been hunting those guerrillas for weeks. Got them all—every last one of them."

Mrs. Russell, once again a woman, began to weep softly, sought comfort in her daughter's arms. Armstrong took a deep breath. "Was close," he said. "That young cowboy—did he get through all right? Without getting hurt, I mean."

The officer smiled again. "Well, from here to where we're bivouacked it's around twenty miles. He rode the whole distance bareback and at a fast clip. He'll find standing most comfortable for a few days. Otherwise, he's fine. And by the way, Marshal," he added, swiveling his attention to Prince, "he said he was your prisoner. Soon as he gave me the information I needed, he put himself in my custody. You'll find him waiting in my tent."

John Prince stared at the officer. Somewhere, deep within his mind, a door opened, a wide door beyond which a pure white light shone brilliantly. He'd been wrong about Dave Kirby. There were others he'd been wrong about, too, most likely. And Kate—maybe he was wrong there. It was possible—no, probable. He could see that now.

He turned to them. There was a smile on his lips, the first they'd seen since he had boarded the stage.

"I'm glad Kirby got through. Took a lot of sand, and when he goes before the judge in Rinconada, like for you to be there with us. Maybe if we all speak up, tell What he did, we can help things along for him a bit."

Mrs. Russell bobbed her head. "I'll speak to my husband. Perhaps he can do something."

Prince swung back to Allingham, "Our thanks to you, too, Major, for getting here when you did."

"My job, sir," the officer said, and started to pull away.

"One thing," John Prince said to the officer. "You have a telegraph wire connection at your camp?"

Allingham nodded, "Hooked in temporarily with the main line."

"Good. Like to send my wife a message, tell her I'll be home shortly."

SHOWDOWN AT BLUE BLUFF

The sheriff and his kid deputy had the killer pinned down—but he had a more deadly weapon than his guns. A woman!

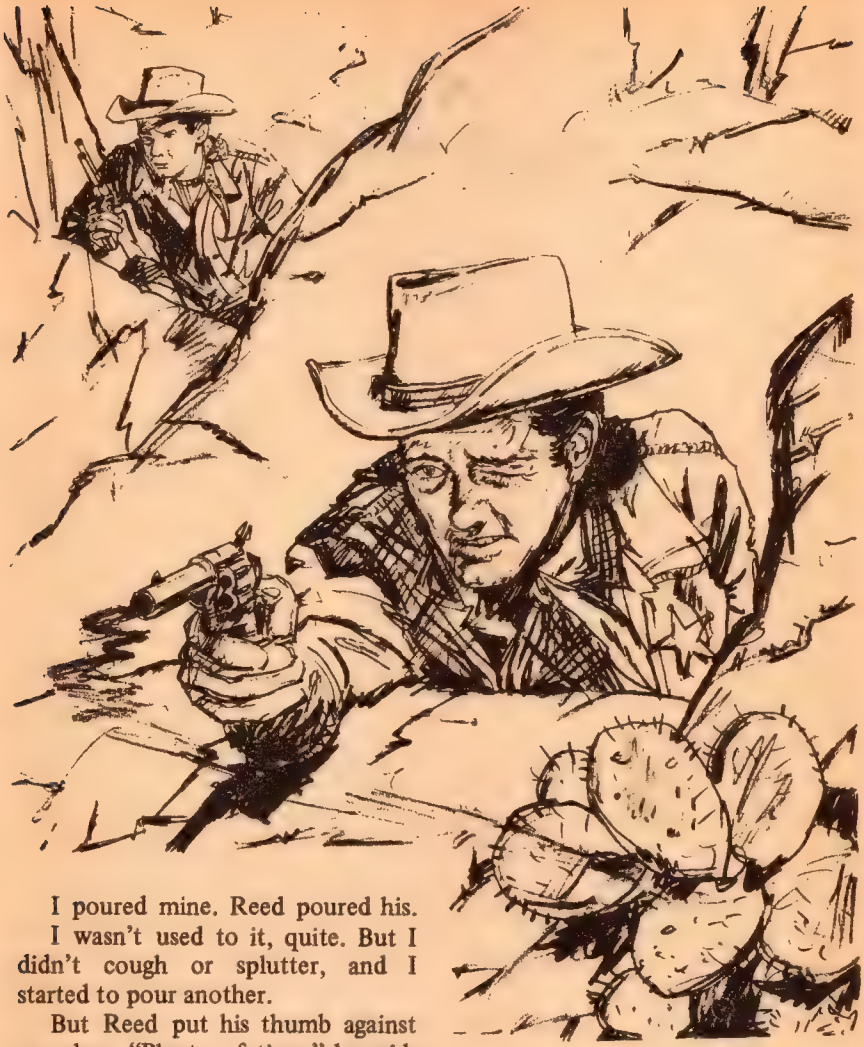
by JAMES McKIMMEY

SOME FOLKS around Blue Bluff —I've heard them myself—say I do a lot of imitating of Reed Maitland. Follow him around like a shadow or something. Well, since I reached my twenty-first birthday, which was three months ago, I've been Reed Maitland's deputy. And if Reed as sheriff does one or two things peculiar to the job, why shouldn't I? Happens that Reed is just a little bit better with the gun and the rope and the horse than most. And as far as I can see, I've got no choice as Reed's right-hand man than maybe to learn to do these things pretty near as well as the man I'm working for.

That afternoon, it was as hot as usual, and Reed and I quit about five to go down to the Golden Rail for a drink.

Fellow name of Slim Withers runs the place. And while I've known Slim for some time, it wasn't until just recent that I was walking in there and slapping the bar and asking for a bottle like I did on this day.

Slim got the bottle quick and sent it sliding down that polished wood. It wasn't like the old kid days when he wouldn't serve me anything.



I poured mine. Reed poured his.

I wasn't used to it, quite. But I didn't cough or splutter, and I started to pour another.

But Reed put his thumb against my glass. "Plenty of time," he said. He didn't do it so anyone would notice, and he didn't say it very loud.

"Well," Slim said behind the bar, sides of his eyes crinkling, "won't be long now, right, Reed?"

"What won't be long now?" Reed said, never smiling.

"Wedding," Slim said. "You and Annie."

Reed picked up the bottle and

poured into my glass, not quite filling it, then he filled his own. "No."

"You getting married, Sheriff?" someone said. And it was this new fellow in town—Stuart, his name was. He had a kind of red face and he was fat in the cheeks.

Reed held his glass between his finger. "Looks that way."

"Good!" this fellow said. His voice was a little high and squeaky. "I like to see a fellow get married. What's her name?"

Reed was always sort of expressionless. You could never tell what he was thinking. "Annie," he said.

"Annie," Stuart said. "That's a pretty name."

"That's a pretty girl," Slim said.

And he was right about that. Annie is about the prettiest girl I ever saw. Real light brown hair, just the color of those autumn leaves on the cottonwoods. Blue eyes, deep blue, like the sky. Skin the color of fresh cream.

"Well," said this man called Stuart, lifting his glass, "here's to a happy union."

Reed nodded, and the three of us tossed down the drinks.

And then Ned Keeler, Dan Hollis' hired man, came busting in, no hat, sweat streaming down his face and soaking his shirt dark.

"He got Dan," he said. And he was breathing so hard you could barely understand him.

"Who got Dan?" Reed said, straightening.

"Got Lyle Kirk too," Ned said. "And Hank Moore. Saw Lyle's wife coming in on the wagon and she told me. *He* told me got Hank. I saw the look in his eyes. I believe him. He's turned into a butcher!"

I saw Reed look down at the floor, eyes dark, a muscle jumping in his cheek.

"Who're you talking about?" this fellow named Stuart called, his voice grating and high, like a saw whining when you worked it fast.

Ned took a big gasp for breath, swallowed, and said, "Jud Cary."

Nobody said anything for a few moments; you could just hear Ned's breathing. Then Reed said, soft-like, whispering almost:

"So he got out, did he? He finally got it done."

"You better go get him, Reed," Ned said. "What you've got there is a wild animal!"

"That's right!" this new man Stuart said. "Busted out of jail? Killed three men today? You better get up a posse!"

Nobody responded.

"A mean-brained killer?" Stuart said, his voice going even higher. "You're going to need a whole outfit for that one, I'd say!"

"You want any help, Reed?" Slim broke in, real quiet.

Reed seemed to come out of a dream. His look just brushed me. He turned to Slim. "Just my deputy," he said.

"Well, you know, Reed. I meant—" Slim motioned his hands.

"We'll take care of it," Reed said.

And we started for the door.

I could hear Stuart's raspy high-whine voice as we left: "Ought to go, every one of us! Man who kills three people—"

But Slim was saying, "Reed's job, no one else's."

"But a damned rotten killer like that—"

"Her brother," Slim said.

"*Whose* brother?"

"Annie's."

WE WENT STRAIGHT to the stable, saddled and rode west. The sun was edging down in front of us. And while we didn't move faster than a good walk, we moved straight and certain because we knew where we were going.

"He'll be there," I said.

"He will," Reed said. "He's always counted on her to protect him."

Reed rode silent, straight, like always, his face not showing anything about what he was thinking. But I had a pretty good idea.

Jud Cary had been gone five years now. He'd been sent east for the murder of Frank House. Twenty-six years old then, same age as Reed, and mean-wild. They said when he was kid he liked to poke eyes out of birds and let them fly blind into trees. Cut a dog up once to take a look at the litter. But even mean and cruel like that, him and Reed somehow got together as good friends. Maybe it was both working for Jud's dad that was responsible. Stripping broncs, riding herd, all like that. Rough pair, separate, or especially together. And nobody'd like to count the times they came into Blue Bluff and broke things apart. They were close.

Until that night.

Which was when Jud got mixed up with Frank House's daughter, Molly. She was thirteen and Jud was drinking. Frank found them in his house, Molly screaming her head off. Frank grabbed his rifle. But it wasn't any match, Frank being just the owner of the general store and no fighter or gunman, either one. Jud shot Frank five times. Each shot would have killed him.

On account of the sound of the shooting, Lyle Kirk, Hank Moore and Dan Holly all got there in time to see Jud standing over Frank with his gun hot in his hand. Molly was crying with her face on Frank's chest, blood all over her.

Old Bob Halgren—he was sheriff then—took Jud in. And when the circuit judge came around and held court, Lyle, Hank and Dan testified. Jud was convicted and sent away for thirty years to life. But before he left, Jud said he'd get those three, for testifying against him.

I didn't know what Reed was thinking. But I could guess. He was maybe thinking about how Molly died when she gave birth to Jud's dead baby. He was maybe thinking about how Jud's dad sort of went to pieces after all that, blaming himself, losing his cattle and horses after a

while, parcelling out his land to homesteaders, trying to grow something out of that land himself and not making much more that just a scant living for him and Annie.

Reed was maybe thinking about how he straightened up himself, after Jud was sent away, and tried to help Jud's dad, like as maybe it was his own fault, somehow, that Jud turned out so no good, seeing as how they buddied together for that long a while. He was maybe thinking, too, how it had been with him and Annie lately—how about the only thing that was wrong between them at all was Jud, the memory of him and the thought that he might get out and do what he said he would.

I knew for a fact that Annie, even if she was younger, loved Jud like a mother would. She could see the mean and evil things he did, up to and including that business with Molly and Frank House, and she couldn't bring herself to condemn him.

So, no, I couldn't tell what it was he was thinking, not from the way his face looked, set and no expression like that. I could just guess at it.

"Be about sunset when we get there," I said finally.

"About."

"Good thing Mr. Cary's gone so he doesn't have to be in on this."

Reed didn't answer me. And so we just rode on. I was riding on Reed's right, and I kept noticing, out of the corner of my eye, how his gun hung just so on his hip. And I reached down and moved mine, so it'd be in the right place.

IT WAS CANYON COUNTRY around the Cary place, and the sun low enough when we got there that the insides of those canyons were turning dark blue with the shadows. We rode along the top ridge, and then, all of a sudden, down below in a long dip that stretched away to flatland, we could see the house. There wasn't much there now, just the house and a lean-to behind it and the stone that marked the grave where Mr. Cary had been buried months ago after he'd died tired and broken-hearted over Jud.

But everything was neat-looking, because Annie made sure it was kept that way. Reed wanted her to move into town after her dad died, but she said she wanted to stay in that house until at least she and Reed got married. We rode a bit further, and then I saw the horses tethered behind the lean-to. One was a roan, and I knew that one was Annie's. The other one was a black.

"His," Reed said, staring down there.

"I expect."

"Well, he knows we'll be here." he said quietly.

I nodded. "I guess."

"He wants Annie in the way," he said, "but I don't."

"Well, he knows that, too," I said.

Reed sat there for a moment, hands resting loose on his thighs. "You better wait here."

"I didn't count on that."

"That's an order."

"I don't hear too well today," I said.

He turned around to look at me, eyes thin, seeming like they were looking right through me. Then he turned back and looked down at the house and started riding very slowly along the ridge that went along beside and above it. I followed.

He stopped just above the house.

"Jud!" he called, and you could hear his voice bouncing and echoing in those canyons. "Give you a fair chance. Come out, no gun, and—"

Two shots exploded inside that house and the bullets whined over us. My horse went up. And then both Reed and I were jerking the horses over to the right, scrambling them down the back side of the ridge. The light was dimming and yellower now, with the sun half-covered by the horizon. I was certain that if the light had been a little better and not tricky to the eye the way it was just then, maybe one of us wouldn't have been so healthy anymore.

"He's not fooling," I said.

"Kill-crazy now," Reed said.

We both got off the horses and hitched them to a jutting rock down from the ridge a way. Then we started back up on foot.

We went down on our stomachs at the point of the ridge. The ground was rocky, and by being careful you could see down to the house without showing yourself. I'd picked a spot about a dozen feet to the right of

Reed. He hadn't drawn his gun yet and I didn't either.

"Annie?" Reed called. "You'd better get out of there."

I lay there watching the house. Nothing happened for a few minutes. Then finally the door facing us opened and Annie stood there, looking up, trying to find Reed and not doing it. But she said, "Leave us be, Reed." She wasn't shouting, but her voice carried up to us full and clear.

I looked at Reed, who was watching her from behind a V of rocks. He said. "Can't do it, Annie. He's broke out of prison. Killed three men today."

"Let him go on his way," Annie said, just as though her brother had never done a wrong thing in his life.

"My job to see he doesn't."

I watched her standing there, her hair even more golden as the sun was disappearing. "You let him go, Reed. You promise me."

"I can't promise that," Reed said finally.

"Don't *you* be the one to harm him," Annie said, her voice shrilling a little now.

"Don't want to be, Annie," Reed said, "but I got no choice."

"Ride away and let him go," Annie said, and she said it the way someone who is beyond reason will say something—kind of wild.

Reed turned over so that his back was against the rock and he looked at me. "You get any glimpse of him in there?"

I shook my head. "Not yet."

"Watch Annie, she doesn't do anything foolish."

"She's just standing there," I said.

Reed raised his voice: "Never thought you'd go this far, Jud—hiding this way behind Annie like a scared gutless baby colt."

Reed knew what he was doing, all right—trying to goad Jud into doing something maybe he hadn't counted on, talking that way. I waited, listening.

And when finally Jud called from the house, his voice made my back crawl. "You got fuzzy in the head since you went with the law, Reed," he said. "I don't need, Annie. Go on, Annie. Leave me be with this. I know all about Reed Maitland, and he's going to be sorry he came after me this way. He'll wish he hadn't come."

But Annie kept standing there in that open doorway.

Reed looked at me again. "Where is he, you figure? What side of the house? Right or left?"

"Left."

"Figure the window?"

I shook my head.

Reed took off his hat and slowly lifted it toward the top of rocks he was behind. The light was gone enough so that the flash of the gun down there was pretty plain. Reed brought the hat down and looked at the hole through the top of the crown.

"Far left window," I said.

Reed turned around and brought himself up close to the rocks on his stomach, the same way I was lying.

"I mean business, Jud," he called.

"Reckon you'll get it," Jud answered.

Reed took out his gun, but the action was slow, as though his hand didn't want to do it.

Annie still stood in the doorway. And now there wasn't any sun in her hair, just her outline, sort of shadowed. But I remembered how she looked around the mouth and in the eyes. And I knew Reed did, too.

"Don't you harm him, Reed," she said. "Not you." Her voice was that same tight pitch, telling Reed, warning him. And at the same time Reed was moving his gun to those rocks like he had to push to get it there.

"Draw him," Reed said to me.

I took my own hat off and lifted

it slow, up and to the side. I felt it kick when the bullet went through. But I only heard one report, and I knew Reed hadn't fired back. I looked back at him, and he was lying there like he was frozen.

"Couldn't place him good enough," he said.

I looked at his eyes and he wouldn't meet my look. He'd found Jud's exact position, all right, right at the tip of his front sight, part of him, anyway, enough to hit him once, then maybe go over that ridge fast and over to the right, firing into that window, getting Jud with three out of six tries anyway. I'd seen him do it before, and with a gunman at that. Same situation almost, same trick with me holding up the hat, and then Reed shooting for that gunman's hand, getting up, running, zig-zagging in, hitting him twice more, killing him.

He'd found Jud all right, but he couldn't pull the trigger.

LYING THERE, still looking at him, I finally knew what I'd have to do. Reed couldn't pull that trigger, and he was sick inside. It was Jud he was aiming at, Jud, his old buddy, Jud, Annie's brother. I knew it'd have to be me who did it, not Reed.

"Draw him again," Reed said. This time he said it between his teeth as though he were fighting himself inside.

"All right." I whipped my hat off to the left, skimming it over Reed's head, so that the peak of it just whirled up above the rocks. I knew Reed suddenly realized what I was going to do. I heard him say, "Don't—"

But that was all because I saw Jud's gun flashing and I fired back at the flash, jumping up at the same time, firing again, to get a good clean shot straight down into that window. Then I felt a tearing, burning feeling. I spun half-around and fell down to the rocks again and tumbled about a dozen feet down the back side of the ridge.

Blood was soaking my shirt as I looked up at Reed.

"That was damn fool thing to do," he said. But I could see in his eyes that, whether it'd been a fool thing or not, he knew why I'd tried it.

"I thought I could get him that way," I said.

"Not Jud."

"Well, I know that now."

"He hurt you bad?" he asked.

I shook my head. "But I don't think I can use my shooting hand any more."

Just then Jud yelled, "I can't fight no more. I'm hit!"

I looked at Reed, and he turned back to the house, calling down, "It's no good simple-lying to me that way, Jud."

"I'm not lying. Kid hit me in the hand and leg. I hope to God I got him."

"Well, you didn't."

"All right, but that don't help me.

I'm bleeding bad. I need help!"

"All you have to do to prove it is come out of there."

"Can't move," he said.

"Did you hit him?" Reed asked, looking at me.

"I don't know. I don't think so. Not twice, anyway."

"All right then," Reed said, "throw your gun out."

Again nothing happened for several moments, then Jud's gun came flying out of that window onto the ground in front of the house.

"Only one?" Reed called.

"Only one," Jud said.

Reed waited a moment, then he put his own gun back in his holster. "Coming down to get you, Jud," he said.

"Now, listen, Reed," I said. "You can't do that. You can't trust a coyote with rabies, and you can't trust *him !* "

"No choice," Reed said.

Then, all of a sudden, he stood up. And my whole insides seemed to jump. He was tall, standing on top of that ridge, a perfect target. I grabbed up my gun in my left hand. But I was swearing at myself for never having learned to use it with either hand.

Then Reed started walking down the slope, not too fast, not too slow. I held my breath, watching him. I could feel the sweat break out in my palm where I held the gun. One more step, and one more. There wasn't any sound from where Jud was. Annie didn't move in her position in the doorway. It was just Reed coming off the slope and starting to cross that space between the slope and house.

Then, suddenly, Annie was screaming, "He's got another gun!"

Reed's hand leaped for his holster, and his gun snapped out, and there was the sound of shots exploding into the evening. Reed's hand jerked as he pumped every bullet out of that gun, half-leaning to the right, the way he always did.

Then there wasn't anything after that but silence, cold, hard, deadly. Slowly, Reed straightened and walked to the window and looked inside. He turned slowly and nodded listlessly to me.

I went over the ridge and down the other side. Annie just stayed there in the doorway, holding her hands at her sides. Reed put his gun backin its holster. I went down and looked through the window. And Jud was dead all right, with that second gun frozen in his hand.

Annie and Reed were silent for a long time. I didn't want to say anything either. Then, finally, Reed said, "I'm sorry, Annie."

She didn't answer. And I was sorry, too—for both of them. I didn't like the sound that was in Reed's voice. And I didn't like the way Annie kept standing there like she was frozen, her face white. I hated Jud for causing all this. But I was sorry for him, too, for the way he was lying on that floor, slumped queer that way, eyes half-open and never going to see anything again.

"Ought to bury him," Reed said after a while, and his voice still had that husky, peculiar sound to it.

Annie seemed to go limp, all of a sudden, and she sort of slumped against the frame of the door. She put a hand up, biting her fingers. Reed started to go over to her. But she said, "No." And Reed didn't touch her.

We waited there, in the darkness, and the moon was showing now, making everything look cold and silvery.

"All right," Annie said finally. "You might as well bury him."

REED TIED A strip of my shirt around my shoulder. Then he went inside to get Jud. I helped him carry the body on back of the house beyond the lean-to. When the earth was over him, fresh-broke and mounded a little, just beside where his daddy was buried, Annie came over, slowly, her face still as white as the moon. She knelt down and, not loud enough so that you could hear it, just moving her lips, started praying. Reed and I bowed our heads and then she stood up.

"You killed him, Reed," she said.

"I did, Annie."

"I killed him, too," she said. The wind was rising and was going across the prairie so that it was blowing against our faces. The grass rustled and somewhere a coyote started howling.

"I had to," she said. "I knew that when he threw out just one gun. He wasn't any good, and I knew he wasn't any good. But I wouldn't let myself really believe it, no matter what he did. Not until I knew he had that one gun yet and he was going to kill you, Reed. I had to do what I did then."

Reed's fingers kept opening and closing slowly, but he didn't say anything.

"But you were still the one who did it," she said, looking at him. "The one who really killed him."

"Yes, I was," Reed said. Then he took his eyes from looking at her. And finally he turned clear away and began walking and I followed along with him. We'd gone almost to the base of the ridge when Annie's voice followed us clear and plain:

"You come back, Reed. Not right away. But in time, when it's healed inside me, you come back."

I knew it would be all right between them—some day, anyhow. I was also sure of something else. I knew that if Reed left me alone any of those times he was gone to see Annie, I could handle the job better than before. Much better. I knew that.

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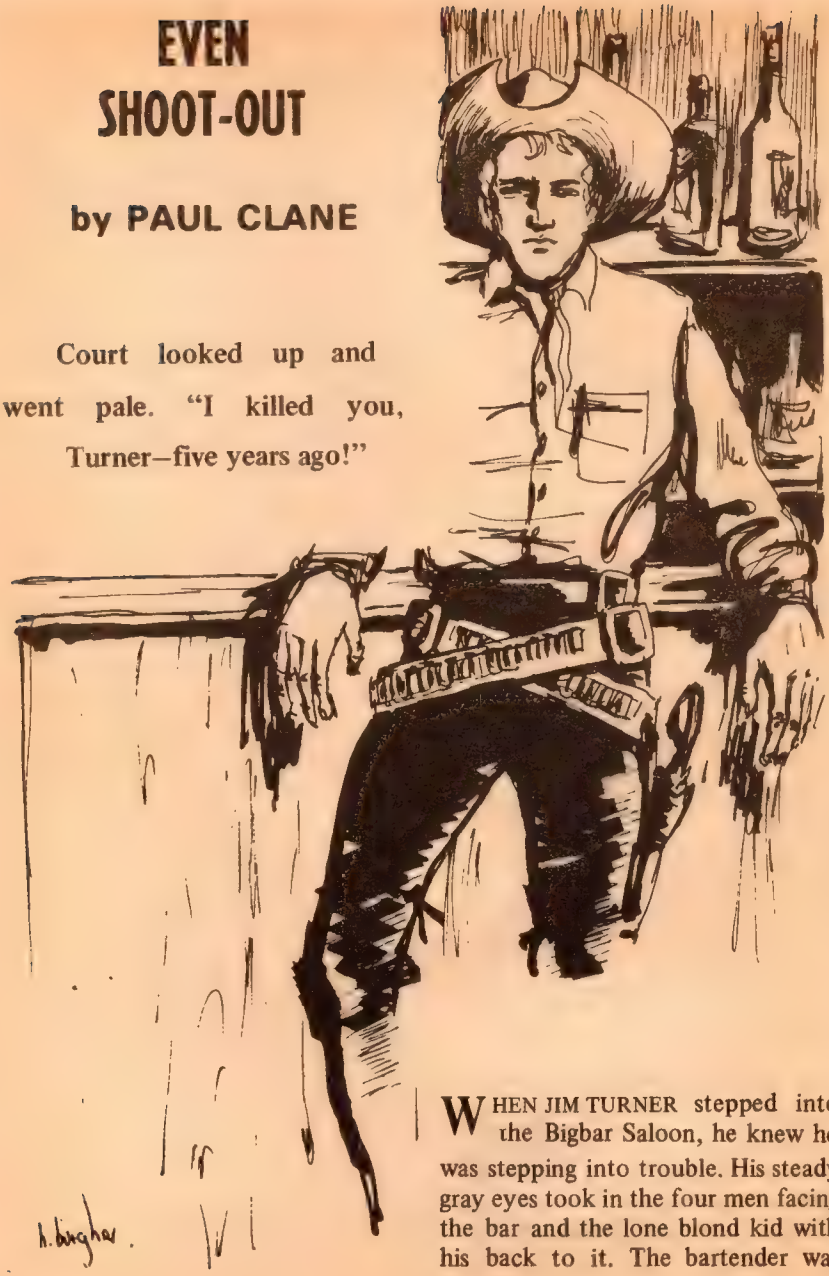
EVEN SHOOT-OUT

by PAUL CLANE

Court looked up and went pale. "I killed you, Turner—five years ago!"



WHEN JIM TURNER stepped into the Bigbar Saloon, he knew he was stepping into trouble. His steady gray eyes took in the four men facing the bar and the lone blond kid with his back to it. The bartender was

hiding a fat paunch as far down the bar as he could get.

The nearest of the four men swung a dirty, unshaven face toward Turner. His red-veined eyes studied the tall, lean man with the red beard. He said, "Try someplace else, mister."

"I like it here," Turner said quietly. "It's nice and cool."

He knew this was none of his business. But there was something about the blond kid, that told him he needed help. He looked game enough, standing there against four of the toughest-looking buzzards Jim Turner had ever seen. But it was easy to tell he wasn't going to win this one alone.

Turner walked deliberately up to the bar and stood alongside the kid. "Name your poison," he told the four cheerfully.

The kid shot a side glance at him and a grin came to his lips. "Ease out," he said. "It ain't your fight."

Jim Turner said, "What's the beef?"

The kid's voice was dry. "I happened to mention to these yahoos they better be scarce the next time the freight wagons from the mines get held up. They took it personal."

"They're not smart enough to do a good job," Turner said idly. His eyes stayed on the four men, still waiting.

"No," the kid agreed slowly, "but there's a smarter jasper back of 'em."

Turner let out a soft gust of air. "Is Dan Court still in this town?"

Immediately he caught the change in the kid's tone. It grew hard. "Mister, you're backin' the wrong man. Better line up with them four."

"You know him, then?"

"My boss."

"Friend?"

The kid cursed. It was enough for Jim Turner. A quiet, cold smile touched his lips. "And they are?"

"That's my guess." Their voices were pitched low, too low for the four not eight feet from them.

Once more Turner smiled. "What are we waiting for, kid?" He took two steps forward. "Do you get out of here or do we throw you out?"

The man who had first spoken shook his head a little as if unable to believe what he heard. Then he grinned, showing a fine set of broken teeth. "He wants to play, boys." He swept one big hand out and dove for Turner.

This was no gunfight. Not one of the men went for his tied-down gun, though Turner saw every man was armed. He sidestepped the ugly man's rush, catching him a sharp blow on the neck with the edge of his hand. He caught his opponent by the shoulder and threw him hard at the other three. The kid let out a wild whoop and charged. Turner followed in, his fists swinging, feeling the solid crack of knuckle against bone.

The fight lasted only a few exultant minutes. Then Turner and the kid backed to the door. Only one

man stood, and he was shaking his head groggily. His eyes lifted and he saw the two going out. His hand dropped for his gun, but Turner moved like a striking snake. His .44 was in his fist.

"None of that," he said flatly. He pushed the batwing doors open with his shoulders and together he and the kid eased into the street.

"Any safe saloons around here?"

The kid pointed up the street. Inside the Red Owl, three doors up, they took their beer to a table and sat down. Jim Turner rolled a cigarette and looked at the boy opposite him. "Tim Rucker," the kid said. "Obliged."

"Name's Reardon," Jim Turner drawled. "What would they have done?"

"Made coyote bait out of me," the kid said simply. "That was Dub Voorheis and his crew."

Turner brushed it aside with a wave of his hand. "I want to know about Dan Court."

Tim Rucker told him. Turner listened avidly, the pattern dropping into place as it had everywhere since he had hit mining country nearly two years before. Dan Court was boss of the Lodestone mine. He had been there for six months; he was on his way to being a respected citizen of Bigbar, Montana.

Jim Turner said, "When the bullion wagons come down from the mines they get picked off?"

"That's right. They've tried changing the times, Running them out secretly—it never works. They've sent decoy wagons. They're never touched. The gang always waits for the loaded ones to come along."

"And you work for Court?"

Rucker nodded. "I ride guard on his wagons."

"I think," Turner said quietly, "you're going to be out of a job soon. Where does this Court hang out?"

"Lodestone office down the street. He's usually in there mornings."

Turner finished his beer and stood up. "I'm obliged now. See you around." He walked out, into the blazing morning sunshine. Outwardly, he was just a tall, thin, bearded man in working cowpoke clothes. Inside, he was tight as a hunter closing in on his kill.

He mounted his paint pony tied in front of the Bigbar saloon and rode nearly to the end of the dusty street. He spotted the Lodestone office, slid to the ground and hitched the horse. He had to fight to keep himself from shaking visibly.

"Two years!" he breathed. After two long, fruitless years he had found his man. He forced himself to stand by the horse, to have full control of himself before he went in to see Dan Court.

Dan Court! Turner closed his eyes and visualized the heavy, scowling features under the shock of black hair. He hadn't seen Court for five years. Not since he had been a smooth-faced kid of nineteen. But he

still remembered Court's dark eyes, set closely over his beaked nose.

Court had been Dan Carter then, a trapped animal backed into a fence corner on the Turner spread. Dan Carter, caught red-handed branding a Turner calf. Jim had ridden for the law while his older brother Bob stood guard.

Jim Turner remembered too clearly Dan Carter's angry cursing of his brother. "I'll get you, Turner. I'll get you if I never do anything else."

He went to prison then, and for three years no one heard of Dan Carter. Jim's mind went back bitterly to the end of those three years. Even now, it could send a wild, hot rage driving through him, a rage that was almost uncontrollable.

Jim and Bob, owners of the Turner spread now, were hunting coyote out on the limitless flat of the Nebraska prairie. With dusk settling in, Jim made camp while Bob tracked down a coyote they had glimpsed not far off. When he heard the gunshot, Jim stopped his camp work. It was not the familiar sound of Bob's Winchester. He listened a moment and then began to run.

He found his brother a good two hundred yards from the camp. His gun lay near by, useless, because he had to use both hands to hold his belly. The blood seeped out between his fingers, and Jim knew he was nearly too far gone to talk.

"It was Dan Carter," Bob Turner gasped out. "They turned him loose and he came after me. Gutshot me, Jim. Get him—swear to me you'll get him!"

"I'll get him," Jim whispered tightly. He held his brother, watching him die in agony.

Getting Bob ready for burial, Jim discovered that Carter had taken his wallet. It puzzled Jim for a time but he dismissed it. The man was what he wanted, not the wallet. And the man was the one he would get.

Now the sun-baked Turner spread belonged to Jim. He sold it, saddled his paint pony, and started down the long trail. Before, an easy-going kid had ridden that horse; now it was a grim, tight-lipped man with only one thought in mind: find Dan Carter.

He picked up the trail near where Kansas turned into Colorado. On a lone tree standing against the prairie wind he saw a dodger. The heavy black printing sent waves of fire through him. Dan Carter again!

He took the dodger, read it again, and put it away. But the words were burned in his mind:

"WANTED—$1,000 REWARD DEAD OR ALIVE FOR BOB TURNER—BANK ROBBERY AND MURDER. This man is twenty-five years old, six feet tall, thick red hair, heavy red beard. Small scar high on left temple."

In the nearby county seat Jim Turner found that a month before the bank had been robbed and twenty-five thousand dollars in gold taken. The bandit had been muffled too well to see, but in leaving, after killing the teller, he had dropped his wallet.

Jim Turner rode on into

Colorado. "So that's why Carter took the wallet!" he muttered to himself. In it, Jim knew, had been Bob's identification and a tintype of himself that he carried around.

Now he let his red hair go uncut and his beard grow out. With the sharp point of his pocket knife he slashed a cut high on his left temple. Before long he found himself looking at his brother instead of his own reflection. They were alike, even to the steady gray eyes. When Dan Carter met him he would see Bob Turner, not his kid brother Jim.

Grimly, Jim Turner followed every clue, every hint. In Leadville he learned Dan Carter had become Dan Court. He kept on. Leadville over to Utah; Utah to Idaho; Idaho into Montana. Always Dan Court was near mining towns. And finally, at the Bigbar saloon, here far east in Montana, Jim Turner heard the magic name again.

Dan Court! Boss of the Lodestone mine!

Jim Turner wondered if Bigbar, Montana, knew the truth about Dan Court, once Dan Carter, ex-convict, bank robber and murderer. They would soon, he promised himself grimly. Unless Dan Court was faster on the draw than Jim Turner.

Drawing a deep breath, Turner shook himself free of the past and walked into the clapboard office building. It was empty but for one man, his back to the door. Deliberately Turner slammed the door. His heart beat fiercely as the man turned.

It was Court! Turner saw the thick black hair, the scowling face. His whole body shook with a sudden urgency to draw his Colt, to shoot this man as he had shot Jim's brother. He held himself back, waiting the other's first move.

Court was very still. His heavy-lidded eyes widened as he studdied the red-bearded man before him. His hands spread out away from his sides to show he was unarmed.

"Hello, Carter," Jim Turner said quietly.

The man made no try at bluffing. "You're dead!" His deep voice rose, cracked. "You're dead, Turner!"

"No, not yet, Carter," Jim Turner said softly. "I'm not dead. No more than I robbed a bank and killed a teller back in Kansas."

Court moved so that his back was to the low counter running across the rear of the office. His breath came hoarsely through his thick lips.

"I'm not armed," Court said. Suddenly, he seemed to realize where he was, who he was. "You wouldn't get away from here alive," he said arrogantly. "You haven't got a chance, Turner."

"I won't shoot you–yet," Jim Turner said grimly. The sight of this man boiled hatred inside him, but on the surface he was calm and easy. "I came to warn you. Go armed from now on."

Dan Court's eyes narrowed as he studied Turner shrewdly. "So you expect the people here to believe your story." He laughed. "I've been here six months. And in six months a man can build a fine reputation. Who'd believe the word of Bob Turner–wanted for bank robbery in Kansas."

"They'll believe me," Jim Turner said quietly. "The Nebraska pen has your record, Carter." It was his turn to laugh. "Carter or Court. That doesn't matter. Many a man has changed his name. The name isn't the man."

"What's your offer?" Court asked abruptly.

"Name your time and place–and bring a gun."

"Don't be a fool!" Court started to turn away, and then he looked again at Turner. His eyes narrowed again and suddenly he smiled. "All right, Turner. And this time I'll see you stay dead–all the way dead." He spoke slowly, deliberately.

"Name it," Jim Turner said. He sounded indifferent.

Court's voice was silky smooth. "I have to go up to the mine today. Follow the noon bullion stage down. Halfway down the road from the mines to the stage road that comes in there, is a cut. At noon, Turner."

"At noon," Jim Turner said quietly. "No tricks, Court."

"You'll give me a fair break?"

Jim Turner laughed harshly. "It'll be an even shoot-out." He backed to the door and slipped out. The hot air felt good in his lungs after being in a room with Dan Court. He forked his pony and rode out of town.

Less than a mile from town a road went abruptly north from the main stage trail. Turner turned, and within a hundred yards he was climbing a series of sharp, steep switchbacks. He could see them rising far above him to the crest of the hills where the big silver mines were located. Halfway to the top he came onto the cut. He pulled off the road and urged his horse up until they were on top of one side of the cut.

Straggly pines grew here, their roots finding hard footing in the rocky soil. Beneath him, he saw the sloping walls of the cut drop to the shadowed road beneath. It had been blasted to save a mile or so of the tortuous switchbacks. It was nearly level down there, but above and below there were steep downgrades.

It was a good place, he thought. Once the train from the mine was out of sight below, there would be no one to disturb them. He thought of Dan Court's almost too-easy acquiescence to his plan and looked around more carefully. It was a good place for a trap, too.

He found a spot halfway down the cut face where blasting had piled huge boulders into a jumbled mass.

There was room between two of them for him to lie. There he would be protected from the rear and he could see the road without being seen. He smiled coldly. If Court had any plans of back-shooting him, he'd better change them now.

The sun was straight overhead when a rumbling from above told Turner the freight was on its way. He lay very still, his eyes squinting into the bright, hot glare in front of him. Slowly, it came into view. There were two huge freighters, each pulled by a six-mule team. The drivers and guards sat high on the boxes, looking carefully in every direction. They moved very slowly, having braked heavily down the last curve, keeping their speeds down to be ready for the one directly below. Jim Turner spotted Tim Rucker high on the lead wagon.

It was halfway through the cut when it happened. From the other side two shots jarred the air. Another cracked from behind Turner. Two men on horseback swarmed down from the left side, firing as they came. One guard rose from his box and pitched headlong to the ground. A shotgun crashed in Tim Rucker's hands. Jim Turner, cursing, pulled his Colt and wriggled free of the rocks.

"A perfect place for a robbery!" he thought. A slow-moving train, the walls of the cut to hide the men waiting.

Now he was shooting. The mounted men wheeled their horses and rode up and out of sight. Jim Turner tumbled down the rubbly sides of the cut and stopped by the guard lying in the dust. One look was enough. A .44 bullet had taken him in the face. He holstered his gun and straightened.

Behind him a cold, familiar voice said, "Raise 'em."

Jim Turner turned slowly, an icy sensation gripping the bottom of his stomach. He looked into the cold, dark eyes of Dan Court. Three other men, big, heavy-set men, held their guns on him. He raised his hands.

"We got one of 'em, Dan," the man next to Court said.

"One's not enough—unless he talks, Roney," Court answered. The muscles of his heavy face were twitching, and Jim Turner could see he was displeased at something. Slowly the meaning of this was dawning on Turner. Hot anger gave way to cold rage. Court had won this round, but he wasn't through yet.

Tim Rucker spoke up. "This yahoo wasn't shootin' at us. He was shootin' at them."

"That's right," Jim Turner said quickly. He looked from one face to another, seeking some softening, some doubt of him as a stage robber. There was none. Whoever these men might be, they were as implacable-looking as Dan Court.

"All right," Turner said. "I'll tell it to the sheriff."

"But," Tim Rucker began again.

Court whirled on him. "You workin' for me or not?"

The boy, gripping his shotgun

firmly, settled himself on the seat of his wagon. Someone brought Turner's horse from above. Roped into the saddle, he was led off, ahead of the freight train.

The jail was about what he expected, a frame crackerbox set on one edge of town. A deputy took Jim Turner's belongings and put him in a cell. The men settled down to wait for the sheriff.

He came in, picking his dinner out of his teeth. Turner's heart dropped. The sheriff was a grizzled old veteran, carrying the scars of Indian battles on his face and hands. He looked hard and cold, not the kind who would believe a stranger's story.

It was late afternoon before Turner found himself alone with the sheriff. By then they had discovered the old dodger in his belongings and were comparing the description on it to the man in the one cell.

"Listen," Jim Turner said desperately, "I've got a story to tell."

The sheriff, at his desk, leaned back in his swivel chair. He was chewing a toothpick. "Tell it," he said.

"I had an appointment today to shoot it out with Court," Jim Turner began.

He told the whole story, from the time Court as Dan Carter had gone to the penitentiary, until now. The sheriff listened, not speaking, only moving his teeth up and down on the toothpick.

"You can check that with the Nebraska pen!" Turner said finally.

"This is Montana Territory, mister. What a man's done, don't count. It's how he acts once he's here."

Turner tried again. "Haven't there been robberies in that mine road cut?"

"Plenty."

"All right, who engineered them?"

"Looks like you had a hand in it," the sheriff said.

"I hit town today. Would I have come running out of there, shooting at the robbers if I was one of them?"

"You could have been signalling them to get away," the sheriff answered. "Look, mister. They got you red-handed. That's all there is to it."

"Ask Tim Rucker, that guard on the first wagon, who I was shooting at," Jim Turner said angrily. "Don't you see it? Court planned it all. He was supposed to meet me there at noon—after the wagons went by. He tipped the bandits off, and then he got a posse. I was caught in the middle. If I rushed out to help, I was caught. If I stayed where I was, they would have searched me out!" He remembered the look of dissatisfaction on Court's face.

"Only I was supposed to have been gunned down. But there were too many witnesses by the time he got to me. It's the truth. All I ask is, get in touch with Nebraska, sheriff."

The sheriff shifted in his chair. "You'll be strung up before I could get word back, mister."

Cursing, Jim Turner turned away.

He hadn't been pleading, simply stating obvious facts. But this old fool wouldn't listen to anything. It was easier doing it this way. Easier and safer.

Bitterly he went to his bunk and sat down. He rolled a cigarette from the sack of tobacco they had left him. When he looked up again, the sheriff was gone. Later, the deputy came in with his supper, stew and coffee, on a tray. He handed it into the cell wordlessly and went out. Still later, as darkness eased down, he came back and lit the office lamp. He disappeared again.

It was full dark outside when a soft whistling from outside his cell window jerked Turner to his feet. Cautiously he moved to the window. The night outdoors was moonless, but there was enough reflection from the town and from the cold stars to see the man under the window.

It was Tim Rucker. Jim Turner answered his whistle with a soft "What?"

"They're comin'," the kid said. He spoke softly, but in a quick, excited voice. "I saw Court headin' back for the mine an' I followed him. I heard plenty."

"Who's coming?" Turner demanded impatiently.

"Court and his men."

"The men who were with him today?"

"No, " Rucker said, "they're mine owners. I mean the yahoos that tried to hold up the freight wagon. Court's got 'em to make it look like they're breakin' you out of jail. Only you'll get shot down. They're on their way now. Four comin' and five still with Court."

Jim Turner said, "Thanks. Does the sheriff know this?" His voice was bitter. "Or would that matter?"

"I can't find the sheriff or the deputy." the kid said. He reached up and cold steel touched Turner's fingers. "Got you a gun, anyway."

"Thanks," Turner said again. "Now you clear out. It's not your brawl."

"I'm makin' it mine," Rucker said, and faded back into the shadows.

Turner turned away from the window. So that was Court's plan since his men had failed to get him at the cut. He grinned coldly. His fingers stroked the butt of the gun. Two could play at Court's game.

He heard the soft movements of men and horses, the faint squeaking of saddle leather. Slowly he slipped to the barred window again. His eyes strained to pierce the gloom outside. There were only shadows. Then he caught the low sound of a whispered voice, too faint for him to distinguish the words. Finally, a few came more clearly to him. He pulled his head back, tense and ready.

Someone had said: "Remember . . . the cut . . . don't shoot until the cut."

The scraps of words told Turner what he had expected. They would get him to the cut before Court and whoever he had managed to get with

him would swing out and shoot him down. He licked his lips and tucked the gun into his belt, pulling his vest over the butt carefully.

Suddenly the jailhouse exploded into action. A pair of riders galloped to the front. One man flung himself to the ground and rushed in, gun drawn. A well-placed shot blew the lock on the door.

"Come on," the man rasped. "Get goin'. We ain't got all night!"

By the light of the one lamp Jim Turner saw a scowling, red-veined face peering at him. It was Dub Voorheis from the saloon. He stepped into the open.

"Get goin'!"

"My gun—"

Dub Voorheis jerked him by the arm. Turner ran outside. There was an extra horse and he leaped aboard swiftly. Three horses and riders swept out of town. Curiously, Turner looked back. Only the lights of Bigbar's three saloons showed any signs of life. The few drunken miners stumbling down the street paid no attention to what had happened.

"Court chose a good time for it," Turner thought.

They picked up two more men where the mine road took off into the hills. Jim was in front, herded by four silent men. He tried to drop back to them but the hoarse voice of Dub Voorheis sent him forward again. That and the glint of starlight on gunsteel.

"Keep ridin'!"

Slowly, inconspicuously, Turner eased his gun from his waistband. The road went up steeply here, and he knew they were nearing the cut. A vague plan was forming, taking shape in his mind. He didn't know from which direction Court would strike but he would have to chance his own quickness saving him from the first assault.

The road levelled off and the dark shadows of the cut lay just ahead. Jim Turner tensed himself, gun ready in his hand. The instant he entered the cut, the split second when shadow first engulfed him, a burst of gunfire cracked sharply in the mountain air. It came from his right.

Automatically, Turner threw himself to the left side of his horse, right foot free of the stirrup. The gunfire rattled again and a man screamed hoarsely. He realized that the men behind him were answering the fire. They were the ones being shot at, not he!

He threw himself from the rearing, frightened horse. His shoulder hit the rocky dirt of the road and then he was on his feet, backing into deeper shadow, his eyes searching the way he had come. A gun flash lit up the scene for a brief instant. Three of the men who had ridden with him were firing at the hillside, their horses milling. From the left side of the bank guns cracked ominously, seeking targets on the opposite hill.

So Court was over there—on the left! But who was on the right? The kid, Turner thought. But there was

more than one man shooting from up there. He counted the flashes. Three on the right. And from above him easily five and possibly six. Court had a real crew!

Swiftly Jim Turner ran along the wall of the cut until he came to the sloping north end. He scrambled up the bank, pulling himself by grasping rocks, scrubby brush, and finally a gnarled pine that told him he was on top. He took a few deep breaths to steady himself and then plunged to his left. A horse screamed from somewhere below. Just ahead of him a man cursed luridly. He saw a bulky outline and fired. The man staggered up straight, whirled, and pitched to the ground.

"They're coming in on us!" It was Dan Court's unmistakeable, heavy voice. Two shots whined at Turner. He dropped behind a boulder and a third bullet chipped rock just above his head.

He fired carefully now, exultant as another man went to the ground. Soon there would be only Dan Court. Soon he would have his man. The memory of his brother lying gutshot on the prairie came vividly to him. Lips compressed, he waited for the telltale gun flash that would light up his target.

There was no firing from below now. The crashing steady shooting from across the canyon had lessened. From below and behind himself, Jim Turner heard the sounds of men climbing up the bank. He leaned out from his rock and fired at a shape ahead of him. An answering shot sent numbing pain up his hand and he found himself staring stupidly at empty fingers. That bullet had taken his gun neatly away from him. Cursing, he eased around the boulder. Belly to the ground, he wiggled forward. From behind rifles opened fire. Court yelled again, and suddenly the thinned-out group in front of Jim Turner exploded into lancing flame and smoking guns. From behind, the deadly crack of the rifles answered. The man in front broke and ran.

Jim crawled on, keeping his head down away from that deadly rifle fire. He reached the limp body of the first man he had shot. His fingers felt around and touched the cooling barrel of a gun. Grunting, he took it and felt for the load. Two shots. If he could find his man he wouldn't need but one.

He was on the edge of the timber now and he rose and ran. He sprinted uphill and to his right, aiming for the sound of a man crashing through the brush ahead of him. A gun barked as he burst into a clearing. He felt the hot whipping of a bullet along his ribs. He stumbled and stepped forward. That flash had shown him the wild, angry face of Dan Court. Dan Court as he had looked trapped at rustling, five years before.

"You're through, Carter." Deliberately Turner raised his gun. His thumb clicked back the hammer. Court stood rigidly, and then he fired. His shot blended with Turner's.

Turner felt a soft tug at the crown of his hat. He thumbed the gun again. He let his hand drop.

Dan Court was crumpling. Like a nightmare dissolving, he dropped from his full height until he was a blob of shadow against the shadowy ground. Jim Turner stood still.

A sound from behind him spun him around. A match flared and the scarred, seamed face of the sheriff showed clearly.

"Dead?"

"Looks that way," Turner answered wearily.

"He'd have been strung up—if they let him live long enough. Looks as if you saved the county a little money, Turner."

"You owe me nothing," Turner said scathingly.

The sheriff grinned. "You make a good story, mister. It got my wind up and I went out to see what Tim Rucker had to say about it. When I heard how you sided him in the saloon, I figured you just might be right. So I trailed out to the mine and sniffed around. I listened to plenty. Got me a little posse and figured on some bushwhacking of my own. It worked, too. I got 'em all."

He stepped forward, around Jim Turner, and looked down at the bundle that had been Dan Court.

"I wouldn't be surprised if there's a reward for that buzzard."

For the first time in a long while Jim Turner's grin was friendly. "I wouldn't either, sheriff. I figured on shaving off this danged beard and seeing about that reward in Kansas for myself."

READ—This Great New NEVADA JIM Novel in the Next Issue:

BEYOND THE MOGOLLON RIM

A Roaring Sequel to ZANE GREY'S Fine Best Seller

NEVADA

The rustlers had big plans—but there was a detail to attend to first. Nevada Jim Lacy was their only danger, and he had to be killed. But Jim Lacy was no easy target—especially when he took to the trail single-handed on his own grim manhunt!

A CARLOAD OF KILLERS

A bristling fence of rifles ringed the cabin—then blazed out to begin a war to the death against a whole county filed with "rustlers"!

by WALTER DALLAS

A STRANGE CARAVAN waited in the railway yards at Cheyenne that spring day in the 1890's There was a flatcar piled with camp equipment and three wagons, a baggage car with huge padlocks on the doors, three stock cars filled with horses, and a large passenger coach with the shades drawn tight shut.

The cars had been shunted into the

yards at noon. That night, two-score armed men slipped, one by one, into the passenger car, and at midnight the train pulled out, headed west.

It was a traveling army . . . the big cattlemen's answer in a bitter feud with the hordes of small Wyoming ranchers, branded as "rustlers," who were eating on the cattle profits.

Up from Texas had come twenty-five hired gunmen, largely former U.S. marshals and sheriffs, led by Major Frank Wolcott of Kentucky. At Cheyenne they were joined by another group of twenty-five range detectives, stock inspectors and foremen representing the Wyoming stock growers. A baggage car was jammed with their rifles, small arms and ammunition.

Johnson County, a hundred miles west of Cheyenne, was the headquarters of the so-called "rustlers." The Wyoming stock growers estimated that there were at least 50,000 head of stolen cattle grazing in Johnson County—and this grim army of gunhawks was out to get them back and kill off all resistance.

The plan of battle was to roll right into the Johnson County supply town of Buffalo and take the place over. Once the invaders were in possession of the railway station there, it was figured, the small cattlemen would be cut off from the outside world and could be exterminated at leisure.

The invaders carried with them a list containing the names of seventy marked men. Heading the list were Champion and Ray, who made their headquarters at the tumbledown KC ranch on the middle fork of the Powder River. Champion and Ray were said to be the brains of Johnson County. It was they who were reputed to have snatched 5000 head of cattle out from under the blazing guns of the Murphy Cattle Company foremen.

The caravan of war rumbled north. Pulling up at Casper, they unloaded and trundled silently away when the sun went down. Across the ridges toward the KC ranch, single file or by twos and threes, rode the black silhouettes of the invading army.

It was never to get to Buffalo.

In the early morning the invaders surrounded the little KC ranch. Ray emerged a little while later and, whistling carelessly, walked to the edge of a stream to fill the bucket he was carrying. A hail of bullets sieved

Gun law was the only law in some parts of the West—and often it took ugly forms. This scarcely believable—yet authentic—account of a bizarre war of extermination is the latest in our continuing series of true action stories of the old West.

him. He dragged himself back to the cabin and Champion pulled him inside.

The invaders ringed the sprawling shack with a bristling fence of rifles. Bullets poured through the windows in a steady shower from all sides. Battling grimly on alone, Champion tended the dying Ray and heroically pumped the trigger of his rifle without a let-up for twelve hours.

For some time the invaders thought there were ten or more men inside the house, for Champion, dashing between the bullets that spat through the windows, fired from each window in turn. Such a pile of wood splinters rose on the floor of the cabin as the flying shots chipped off the logs that Champion's bleeding legs were stuck as full of slivers as a porcupine as he crawled from one post to another.

Amazingly, through the siege, the defender kept a painstaking diary. Those bloodstained pages told a story of superb heroism, and read in part: *"Midday: Ray is dying ... Afternoon: Ray is dead ... I am running out of ammunition ... Evening: They have fired the cabin ..."*

The shanty-ranchhouse was set afire in the dusk and Champion broke out and plunged towards a nearby ravine. He was riddled with bullets, then Major Wolcott walked over and pinned to his chest a sign that read: *"Cattle Thieves Beware."*

THE INVADERS WERE flushed with triumph. In a single day they had wiped out the two men they most wanted.

But by nightfall, the tables were turned.

The day-long battle of the KC ranch had been witnessed by a neighboring rancher named Torrance Smith. He rode wildly from one spread to another and the whole of Johnson County, led by the sheriff, was armed and in the saddle in five hours.

Soon, the fifty gunmen were thundering down the road, pursued by irate Johnson County "rustlers" intent on protecting their homes and lives. The invaders holed up in the TA ranch twenty miles away from the KC and threw up defense along the sides of the house. They were now in a very hot spot themselves.

Among the invaders was a young doctor, Charles Penrose, a Harvard classmate of Wyoming's lieutenant governor, Amos Barber. Dr. Penrose was an adventurer, but he was getting more adventure than he had asked for. He managed to get a message out to Barber at the state capital, which arrived shortly after Barber, following the sudden death of the former governor, had succeeded to the gubernatorial chair. Penrose's classmate saved his neck by telegraphing the President that Wyoming was in the throes of a civil war.

Three divisions of the U.S. cavalry from Fort McKinney pounded hastily down to the battlefield and took the place over. They arrived the second afternoon of the seige just in

time to stop the grim besiegers from heaving dynamite into the ranchhouse.

Of the invaders, only two were dead. The rest surrendered to the Federal troops and were marched back to Cheyenne.

The jail wasn't big enough to house the beaten army, so they lived pleasantly in a compound on the city limits, doing pretty much as they pleased. A few months later the court finally got around to summoning them for a hearing.

They were released on bail provided, very much under cover, by the cattlemen who had hired them. Then they rode back to Texas, promising earnestly that they would be back in time for the trial. No one ever saw them again.

The sole invader who nearly paid with his neck for his reckless adventure was the young Dr. Penrose, who foolishly returned to Johnson County.

The furious "rustlers" were cooking up a high-class necktie extravaganza for this nosey Easterner when his friend, Governor Barber, rushed a U.S. marshal up into Johnson County. A wild, threatening crowd gathered around the jail, but the lawman hustled the frightened doctor out of town, rode out in the middle of the prairie, and flagged an eastbound Union Pacific express.

As he put the fugitive aboard, he told him; "Don't stop till you git to Nebraska!"

By that time, the "rustlers" of Johnson County were respectable cattlemen and most of them were members of that same stock growers' association that had once hired fifty men to wipe them out.

The sturdy state of Wyoming was never invaded again.

Coming Soon:

DOC POTTER'S SIXGUN CURE

A Stirring Tale of Fast Gunplay and Stark Vengeance

by LUKE SHORT

A worn-out bum . . . an aging doctor . . . a dying girl—how could they get their revenge on the man they hated? They were powerless—but, hidden in a secret room was their ace in the hole . . . a doomed fugitive with leaden death in his holster!

Zane Grey is best known for his stories of action and sweeping adventure under the big sky of the West. But few writers have matched him in his depiction of life on a working cattle ranch, and the situations and problems cowboys actually faced. This month's Zane Grey reprint is a tale of one such cowboy, down on his luck—and of what happened to threaten his chance for a new start.

THE CAMP ROBBER

He half-killed the man who called him thief—then set out to track the real criminal .... But the trail led far back into his own past!

by ZANE GREY

"WHAT THE deuce!" exclaimed Hoff Manchester, the Selwyn Ranch foreman.

"Boys, it ain't no joke," said cowhand Slab Jacobs. "Shore as the Lord made little apples, we been robbed!"

The boys of the Selwyn Ranch had returned from the Spring round-up . . . to find their bunkhouse door standing open and their quarters ransacked.

Yet a quick search, punctuated by an infinite variety of cowboy speech, revealed only a few valueless trinkets missing; untouched were a set of silver-mounted spurs, money, and a diamond stickpin.

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"Hoof, the laugh's on us. What's your idea?" Jacobs asked.

"By gum, I think we've had a visit from the camp robber."

"Who's this camp robber?" asked one of the cowboys.

The foreman answered him:

"Wal, I reckon the camp robber always has been a joke round this range. But I can conceive of that joke wearin' out. He's been crackin' them jokes for a good while now. I've heard them from all over, an' this is no slouch of a range. But for the most part such stealin' seems to have been confined to Clear Creek, Cottonwood, an' the Verdi. Whatever or whoever this thief is, he comes in the day time, when there's nobody home, an' he takes some fool thing or other, leaving articles of real value. This bird sure is a slick ore, whoever he is. Last year he stole two dolls we know of."

"Dolls?"

"Yes, dolls. Stimpson over on Clear Creek has a little girl. She lost a doll. Mrs. Stimpson said the kid was sure she never lost it—that it was took. Wal, they got her another doll, an' by golly, not long after, when the family was all away, thet doll disappeared, too.

"Now I tax myself, I can remember the darndest lot of things the loss of which was laid on thet locoed thief. Comb an' brush, silver buckles, beads, handkerchiefs, socks, cough medicine, face powder, lace curtains, towels, mirror, bell, clock. Oh, Lord, there's no end to them. Yet nothin' worth much, so to speak. Everybody just laughs an' says, 'wal, by gosh, the camp robber has been here."

STIMPSON pushed back his papers on the desk and looked up at the rider with a keen interest.

"So your name's Wingfield?"

"Yes, sir," was the quiet reply.

The rancher surveyed the lithe figure, dusty and worn, the dark, lined face and its piercing eyes, with appreciation of the strong impression they gave.

"Where have you been ridin'?" Stimpson asked.

"I rode for Stillwell durin' the spring roundup. But he didn't need me longer. I got on at Brandon's. Lasted only one pay day. Next got a job at Hall's. Couldn't stay there. Then Randall's . . . An' as I told you I've been ridin' a grub line since."

"Wingfield, tell me just why you couldn't hold a job?" asked Stimpson.

"It was my fault, sir."

"You don't look like a drinkin' man."

"Well, I hit the bottle pretty stiff some years ago—just after . . . But I tapered off—an' lately I haven't drank at all."

"Because you were broke?"

"No. I've a little money left. I just got sick of it."

"I can understand that. Now if you want to work for me, come clean about this trouble you've been havin'. Tell me why a man of your

evident intelligence an' ability can't hang on here."

Wingfield looked out of the window, across the summer range, where the heat veils were rising. His face twitched. It was somber and sad. And when he turned again, Stimpson saw that the dark lightning of his eyes had dimmed.

"Seems, sir, that I can't stay

anywhere long. I've been restless, an' I reckon I'm irritable. Can't make friends. I don't care about anythin'. But I realize now that I've got to correct that. An' I promise you, if you'll take me on, I'll try to overcome it."

"I'll take you on, Wingfield. Thanks for your confidence. I appreciate it. I'd like to know more, though. What happened to such a fine fellow as you—that you don't care for anythin'?"

"Some years ago I—I lost my wife—an' it knocked me out," said Wingfield.

"Ahuh. Too bad! . . . I didn't take you for a married man. How old are you, Wingfield?

"I'm twenty-nine."

"Well, that surprises me. You look older . . . All right, Wingfield, you're on. An', let us hope, to your advantage as well as mine. Report to Neff, an' ask for quarters, by yourself, if you prefer. Later today we can talk wages an' what this particular job is."

That deal was consummated in July. Wingfield made a valiant effort to prove worthy of the opportunity Stimpson had placed in his way. And he succeeded so far as the work was concerned. He overcame much to stick to that job, but he could not correct his taciturn habit, his aloofness, and sharpness of tongue, when he did speak.

Naturally he had not made friends with Stimpson's foreman, Neff. Signs were not wanting, however, that some of the riders looked favorably upon him. He had even been asked to accompany them to town this Saturday night, which was the end of August, and pay day.

Late that afternoon Wingfield rode back to the ranch, and before he dismounted in front of Neff's cabin he sensed trouble. All the riders were in. Wingfield went in without greeting any of those who regarded him curiously.

"Wingfield," spoke up Stimpson, "the payroll is missin'."

"It is, sir? . . . Well!—How you mean—missin'?" asked Wingfield, flashing his eyes from Neff to the rancher.

"I don't know how," said Stimpson, slowly, guarded in his speech. "I just got here . . . Speak up, Neff."

"It—it was this way, boss," re-

plied Neff, hurriedly. "Reckon I got here about ten o'clock. Straight from the house, when you gave me the money. Wally Peters over there helped me count it. Didn't you, Wally?"

"Yes, I did," answered a cleancut young cowboy, stepping forward to confront the rancher. "There was two thousand, three hundred an' sixty dollars. Neff put it in the desk here. shut the drawer—this one, sir, but he didn't lock it. Then we went out together."

"Had there been anyone about the place?" inquired Stimpson.

"Yes, sir. Wingfield must have been in—I found the paper—here it is—shows the time of his outfit. I always pay from his figures . . . This paper was here when I came back. But not when I left," said Neff.

Wingfield spoke up instantly. "That is correct, sir. I left my time paper here about noon. There was no one in."

A silence ensued that developed from embarrassment to a strained suspense.

Then Stimpson, seeing that Neff would not or could not accuse Wingfield to his face burst out impatiently:

"Wingfield, I'm sorry I have to explain. Neff has charged you with theft of the payroll!"

Wingfield gave a grasp that sounded like suppression of a cry of pain. His dark face went ashen. With one swift lunge he struck Neff a terrific blow, knocking him over a chair, to crash into a corner. Then Wingfield leaped clear, drawing his gun.

The spectators of that move waved in noisy pellmell to one side, leaving Stimpson standing his ground. With a long stride he got in front of Wingfield.

"Hold on!" he called, sharply. "There's no call for gun play."

Indeed there did not appear to be at least at the moment, for Neff had been completely knocked out. Wingfield slowly sheathed his gun. The fury that had actuated him seemed to shudder out.

"My God—*you* don't believe I stole that money!" he asked Stimpson.

The rancher took one long look at the man's convulsed face.

"No, Wingfield, I don't," he replied, feelingly. "But Neff does, an' no doubt he's not the only one. Somethin' must be done about it."

"Thank you. Stimpson," said Wingfield huskily. "I swear to God I didn't take the money."

"You need not deny that to me." replied the rancher. "But you can see, Wingfield, if you're to stay on here, you must try to *prove* you didn't.

"Yes. I see. An' I've fallen pretty low—when any range rider dares think me a thief." muttered Wingfield.

"Circumstantial evidence has hanged many a man. Don't let it beat you here. You're valuable to me. An' it's sure plain, Wingfield—either you

crack an' lose out, or you prove what I think you are."

Wingfield raised his bowed head and the harshest of the bitter darkness left his face. He made no move to reach the rancher's half-proffered hand.

"I'll take your hand when I show these men your faith in me is justified."

That night Wingfield lay dressed on his bed in the darkness and silence. All hands had gone to town for the dance.

Lying there in the blackness he waged the battle. If he had not become a sore and strange outsider all over the range, if he had hid the secret of his misery in wholesome labor and friendliness, he would never have been accused of theft. That was the last straw.

He did not choose to sink under that. He would disprove the charge, and thereafter regulate his conduct to harmonize with his environment. Stimpson had been right—he must mend his character or crack for good.

But there could never be any mending of his broken heart. In the five years since the catastrophe there had never been a single night, when he was sober, that he had not lain awake, thinking, remembering, suffering. He had wronged his wife, and in the shame of his unworthiness he had augmented the quarrel that had ended in her leaving him. It all came back mockingly, and he lived over again his fruitless search for her, and then his despair.

He beheld for the thousandth time a vision of the bonny head, with its curly golden locks, and the flower-like blue eyes; and the frail graceful shape. Long ago he divined she was dead. She could never have borne grief and privation together. She had never been strong, though she had gained somewhat after he took her from school teaching and married her. He recalled with agony his panic, his joy, his pride, when she shyly imparted a secret, and how zealously from that moment he had guarded her health.

Then came his fall, a natural though despicable thing. Vain regret. Sleepless and eternal remorse! But these pangs were softening with the years. He knew that before she died she had forgiven him, and that if he could have found her they would have been reunited.

There in the dead hour of midnight he struggled for faith to believe she might hear his whisper and give him strength to live better the life that had to be lived.

Sunrise found him out behind Neff's cabin, studying in the clear light of day some strange tracks he had found.

A faint long flat depression of grass and dust and on each side of it a small round mark, scarcely a hole. Wingfield followed the tracks at a walk into the woods.

In places, where the pine needles formed thick springy mats, devoid of grass or flowers, he passed quickly on in the direction in which the trail

headed, and sooner or later, on more favorable ground he would find it again. It led deeper and deeper into the woods.

In the afternoon on the first clear spot of soft ground that he had encountered in miles he found the well-defined print of a large flat foot. Close on each side was the accompanying little round mark.

"Ahuh! He's slipped off that long thing which gave me such trouble," Wingfield, as he surveyed the trail. "Quit on me, huh? Feelin' pretty safe now! . . . *One foot-track!* . . . By thunder! I've got it. He's a cripple. A one-legged man! An' these little round tracks were made by crutches . . . I'm a locoed son-of-a-gun!"

With renewed enthusiasm and stronger resolve and curiosity, Wingfield pressed on; and now, owing to the slackened vigilance of the man he was trailing, he made fast time.

Almost at his feet showed a narrow trail leading down the precipitous wall. And the tracks he was trailing stood out like print on a page.

Five hundred feet down, the trail emerged from the shade into the open canyon, where Wingfield's advent scarcely disturbed the turkeys and deer.

He proceeded slowly and cautiously. A little gray burro grazed in the one open glade. Beyond this, a jutting wall shut off extended view.

He kept close to the wall, under cover, and soon peeped around the yellow stone corner. He was amazed to discover a child playing in front of an old weatherbeaten cabin.

Wingfield sheathed his gun and stepped out, to approach the little girl. She saw him before he spoke.

"Hello, little girl. Do you live here?"

"Who's you?" she asked, without alarm, though she ceased her play.

"I'm a cowboy. Where's your mother—an' your daddy?"

"My muvver's dead . . . I never had no daddy," she said.

She could not have been more than five years old. She was very pretty with eyes as blue as cornflowers. It needed not a second glance at her crude strange garments for even Wingfield to see that no woman had made them. Her little dress had been fashioned from a cowboy's shirt.

Upon her feet were moccasins made from sheepskin, with the wool outside; and Wingfield believed that material had come from a range rider's vest. Then the thought that had been dammed by his consciousness burst through—he had stumbled upon the retreat of the camp robber.

"My grandad's sick," said the little girl, seriously.

"Where is he?" asked Wingfield, thickly.

She pointed toward the cabin. The door was open and the sunlight poured in.

An old man, with face as gray as his hair and beard, lay upon a bed. His bright eyes fixed in terrible earnestness upon the visitor.

"Well, old timer, who are you?" burst out Wingfield, taking in the gaunt form and the wooden leg strapped to a short thigh.

"Did you ever—hear—of Peg-leg Smith?" came the husky response.

"Sure I have. Old prospector—traveled round with a burro. I've heard the cowboys talk . . . Ahuh! Are you that hombre?"

"Yes . . . Did you trail me?"

"I did—old timer. I'm sorry. The little girl said you were sick."

"Aye, I am indeed . . . sick unto death."

"Aw, no. Don't say that. Maybe I can do somethin'. What ails you?"

"Old age. Love an'—fear," he returned.

"I don't just savvy the last," said Wingfield, approaching the bed in quandary. But pity was paramount.

"Did you trail me?"

"Yes, but you needn't fear me. Only tell me, old timer."

"You trailed me to get back the money I stole from Stimpson's ranch?"

"I did, Smith. You see they accused me of stealin' it."

"It is here—every dollar," hurriedly cried the man, and laboriously fumbling under his head he found a packet, and held it out with shaking hand.

"Thanks, old timer. That'll help a lot," said Wingfield, huskily. "How'd you come to—to take it?"

"Stranger, I never stole a cent in my life until then. All I stole was for the child. But that day—when was

it?—yesterday? When I saw the money I had a wild idea. I would steal that—and with it—I'd take my little girl away—and find a home and comfort for her—some one to love her . . . So I stole it. And when I got back—I fell here—it's the end . . . Thank God, you came. I can die in peace."

"Is this child related to you?" asked Wingfield.

"No. Five years ago—over on the mountain range—I happened to find a woman along the road . . . She was a crazed thing—ill—suffering. I put her on my burro. Fetched her here. She gave birth to a child. . . Then she lingered a few days—and died. The child lived. Meant to take her—somewhere—to a home. But I loved

her. I kept her. All these years I've kept her. No cowboy or hunter ever found me until now. No one ever dreamed old Pegleg Smith had a little angel in his canyon . . . I stole for her. I became the camp robber of the range. Many's the time I have laughed over my other name . . . The camp robber!"

Wingfield fell on his knees beside the bed.

"Old timer, tell me–her name?" he begged, hoarsely, his lean hands clutching at the blanket.

"Her name is Fay."

"No. Not the child . . . the woman–her mother . . . her name?"

"I never knew. She never told. But in her delirium she would cry out: 'Lex–*Lex!* Oh, Lex, my husband! . . . An' she died crying that name. I've never forgotten."

"Merciful God!" moaned Wingfield, sinking down. "Man–I was that husband . . . this is my baby."

"Who are you?" queried Smith, rising upon his elbow, with hope illuminating his face.

"Lex Wingfield. . . Her name was Fay Kingsley . . . . We were married in Denver . . . . It was here in Arizona–on this range–at Springer that I–I made her unhappy, and she left me."

"Kingsley–Denver–Springer, yes, she mentioned those names," replied Smith eagerly and softly. "How strange! I never wanted to leave this canyon. Something chained me here . . . I gave up prospecting . . . I took to stealing . . . So, it was the camp robber who found little Fay's father."

Wingfield leaped up with a start. The child had come in.

"Is you better?" she asked, with sweet solicitude.

"No, little Fay . . . You are losing grandad . . . But you–are gaining–your daddy."

WATCH FOR THESE ZANE GREY CLASSIC ENCORES

*

THE GREAT SLAVE
FROM MISSOURI
LIGHTNING
MONTY PRICE'S NIGHTINGALE
TAPPAN'S BURRO
TIGRE

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

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TIMBERLINE

By OWEN WISTER

ILLUSTRATED BY H. T. DUNN

A "wanted" poster that hung in the sky like a phantom—the ghostly light that danced on the horns of a thousand steers—the sinister riders who would not approach us—all played their parts in the eerie story of the drifter known only as "Timberline."

JUST AS THE blaze of the sun seems to cast wild birds, when, by yielding themselves they invite it, into a sort of trance, so that they sit upon the ground tilted sidewise, their heads in the air, their beaks open, their wings hanging slack, their feathers ruffled, and their eyes vacantly fixed, so must the spot of yellow at which I had sat staring steadily and idly have done something like this to me—given me a spell of torpor in which all thoughts and things receded far away from me. It was a yellow poster, still wet from rain.

A terrifying thunderstorm had left all space dumb and bruised, as it were, with the heavy blows of its noise. The damp seemed to make the yellow paper yellower, the black letters blacker. A dollar-sign, figures and zeros, exclamation points, and the two blackest words of all, *reward* and *murder*, were what stood out of the yellow.

Two feet from it, on the same shed, was another poster, white, concerning some stallion, his place of residence, and his pedigree. This also I had read, with equal inattention and idleness, but my eyes had been

drawn to the yellow spot and held by it.

Not by its news; the news was now old, since at every cabin and station dotted along our lonely road the same poster had appeared. They had discussed it, and whether he would be caught, and how much money he had got from his victim.

The body hadn't been found on Owl Creek for a good many weeks. Funny his friend hadn't turned up. If they'd killed him, why wasn't his body on Owl Creek, too? If he'd got away, why didn't he turn up? Such comments, with many more, were they making at Lost Soldier, Bull Spring, Crook's Gap and Sweetwater Bridge.

I sat in the wagon waiting for Scipio Le Moyne to come out of the house; there in my nostrils was the smell of the wet sage-brush and of the wet straw and manure, and there, against the gray sky, was an after-image of the yellow poster, square, huge and blue. It moved with my eyes as I turned them to get rid of the annoying vision, and it only slowly dissolved away over the head of the figure sitting on the corral with its back to me, the stock-tender of this stage section. He sang: *"If that I was where I would be Then should I be where I am not; Here am I where I must be, And where I would be I cannot."*

I could not see the figure's face, or that he moved. One boot was twisted between the bars of the corral to hold him steady, its trodden heel was worn to a slant; from one seat-pocket a soiled rag protruded, and through a hole below this a piece of his red shirt or drawers stuck out. A coat much too large for him hung from his neck rather than from his shoulders, and the damp, limp hat that he wore, with its spotted, unraveled hat-band, somehow completed the suggestion that he was not alive at all, but had been tied together and stuffed and set out in joke. Certainly there were no birds, or crops to frighten birds from; the only thing man had sown the desert with at Rongis was empty bottles. These lay everywhere.

As he sat and repeated his song there came from his back and his hat and his voice an impression of loneliness, poignant and helpless. A windmill turned and turned and creaked near the corral, adding its note of forlorness to the song.

A man put his head out of the house. "Stop it," he said, and shut the door again.

The figure obediently climbed down and went over to the windmill, where he took hold of the rope hanging from its rudder and turned the contrivance slowly out of the wind, until the wheel ceased revolving.

The man put his head out of the house, this second time speaking louder: "I didn't say stop that. I said stop it; stop your damned singing." He withdrew his head immediately.

The boy—the mild, new yellow hair on his face was the unshaven

It is truly fitting for the *Zane Grey Western Magazine* to present this fine story by Owen Wister. For if Zane Grey was the Conan Doyle of Western writing—the man who made the Western story the immensely popular form it is today—then Owen Wister was its Edgar Allan Poe—the man who first put together the elements to make something that had not existed before, in his memorable novel *The Virginian.* "Timberline" is vintage Wister, in its protrayal of the ways and color of the old West and in its vivid characters and action.

THE EDITORS

growth of adolescence—stood a long while looking at the door in silence, with eyes and mouth expressing futile injury. Finally he thrust his hands into bunchy pockets, and said:

"I ain't no two-bit man."

He watched the door, as if daring it to deny this, then, as nothing happened, he slowly drew his hands from the bunchy pockets, climbed the corral at the spot nearest him, twisted the boot between the bars and sat as before only without singing.

Thus we sat waiting, I for Scipio to come out of the house with the information he had gone in for, while the boy waited for nothing. *Waiting for nothing* was stamped plain upon him from head to foot. This boy's eyebrows were insufficient, and his front was as ragged as his back. He just sat and waited.

Presently the same man put his head out of the door. "You after sheep?"

I nodded.

"I could a-showed you sheep. Rams. Horns as big as your thigh—bigger'n *your* thigh. That was before tenderfeet came in and spoiled this country. Counted seven thousand on that there butte one morning before breakfast. Seven thousand and twenty-three, if you want exact figgers. Quit your staring!" This was addressed to the boy on the corral. "Why, you're not a-going without another?" This convivial question was to Scipio, who now came out of the house and across to me with the news that he had failed on what he had went in for.

"I could a-showed you sheep—" resumed the man, but I was now attending to Scipio.

"He don't know anything," said Scipio, "nor any of 'em in there. But we haven't got this country rounded up yet. He's just come out of a week of snake fits, and, by the way it looks, he'll enter on another about tomorrow morning. But drink can't stop *him* lying."

"Bad weather," said the man, watching us make ready to continue our long drive. "Lot o' lightning loose in the air right now. Kind o' weather you're liable to see fire on the horns of the stock some night."

This sounded like such a good one that I encouraged him. "We have nothing like that in the East."

"Hm. Guess you've not. Guess you never seen sixteen thousand steers with a light at the end of every horn in the herd."

"Are they going to catch that man?" inquired Scipio, pointing to the yellow poster.

"Catch him? Them? No! But I could tell 'em where he's went. He's went to Idaho."

"Thought the '76 outfit had sold Auctioneer," Scipio continued conversationally.

"That stallion? No! But I could tell 'em they'd ought to." This was his good-by to us; he removed himself and his alcoholic omniscience into the house.

"Wait," I said to Scipio as he got

in and took the reins from me. "I'm going to deal some magic to you. Look at that poster. No, not the stallion, the yellow one. Keep looking at it hard." While he obeyed me I made solemn passes with my hands over his head. "Now look anywhere you please."

Scipio looked across the corral at the gray sky. A slight stiffening of figure ensued, and he knit his brows. Then he rubbed a hand over his eyes and looked again.

"You after sheep?" It was the boy sitting on the corral. We paid him no attention.

"It's about gone," said Scipio, rubbing his eyes again. "Did you do that to me? Of course you didn't! What did?"

I adopted the manner of the professor who lectured on light to me when I was nineteen. "The eye being normal in structure and focus, the color of an after-image of the negative variety is complementary to that of the object causing it. If, for instance, a yellow disk (or lozenge in this case) be attentively observed, the yellow-perceiving elements of the retina become fatigued. Hence, when the mixed rays which constitute white light fall upon that portion of the retina which has thus been fatigued, the rays which produce the sensation of yellow will cause less effect than the other rays for which the eye has not been fatigued. Therefore, white light to an eye fatigued for yellow will appear blue—blue being yellow's complementary color. Now, shall I go on?" I asked.

"Don't y'u!" Scipio begged. "I'd sooner believe y'u done it to me."

"I can show you sheep." It was the boy again. We had not noticed him come from the corral to our wagon, by which he now stood. His eyes were eagerly fixed upon me; as they looked into mine they seemed almost burning with some sort of appeal.

"Hello, Timberline!" said Scipio, not at all unkindly. "Still holding your job here? Well, you better stick to it. You're inclined to drift some."

He touched the horses and we left the boy standing and looking after us, lonely and baffled.

"Why Timberline?" I asked after several miles.

"Well, he came into this country the long, lanky innocent kid you saw him, and he'd always get too tall in the legs for his latest pair of pants. They'd be half up to his knees. So we called him that. Guess he's most forgot his real name."

"What is his real name?"

"I've quite forgot."

This much talk did for us for two or three miles more.

"Do you suppose the man really did go to Idaho?" I asked then.

"They do go there—and they go everywhere else that's convenient—Canada, San Francisco, some Indian reservation. He'll never get found. I expect like as not he killed the confederate along with the victims—it's claimed there was a cook along, too. He's never showed up. It's a bad

proposition to get tangled up with a murderer."

I sat thinking of this and that and the other.

"That was a superior lie about the lights on the steers' horns," I remarked next.

Scipio shoved one hand under his hat and scratched his head. "They say that's so," he said. "I've heard it. Never seen it. But—tell y'u—he ain't got brains enough to invent a thing like that. And he's too conceited to tell another man's lie."

"There's St. Elmo's fire," I pondered. "That's genuine."

Scipio desired to know about this, and I told him of the lights that are seen at the ends of the yards and spars of ships at sea in atmospheric conditions of a certain kind. He let me also tell him of the old Breton sailor belief that these lights are the souls of dead sailor-men come back to pray for the living in peril; but stopped me soon when I attempted to speak of charged thunder clouds, and the positive, and the negative, and conductors, and Leyden jars.

"That's a heap worse than the other stuff about yellow and blue," he objected. "Here's Broke Axle. We'll camp here.

SCIPIO'S SLEEP WAS superior to mine, coming sooner, burying him deeper from the world of wakefulness. Thus, he did not become aware of a figure sitting by our little fire of embers, whose presence penetrated my thinner sleep until my eyes opened and saw it. I lay still drawing my gun stealthily into a good position and thinking what were best to do; but he must have heard me.

"Lemme show you sheep."

"What's that?" It was Scipio starting to life and action.

"Don't shoot Timberline," I said. "He's come to show us sheep."

Scipio sat staring stupefied at the figure by the embers, and then he slowly turned his head around to me, and I thought he was going to pour out one of those long corrosive streams of comment that usually burst from him when he was enough surprised. But he was too much surprised.

"His name is Henry Hall," he said to me very mildly. "I've just remembered it."

The patient figure by the embers rose. "There's sheep in the Washakie Needles. Lots and lots and lots. I seen 'em myself in the spring. I can take you right to 'em. Don't make me go back and be stock-tender." He recited all this in a sort of rising rhythm until the last sentence, in which the entreaty shook his voice.

"Washakie Needles is the nearest likely place," muttered Scipio.

"If you don't get any you needn't to pay me any," urged the boy; and he stretched out an arm to mark his words and his prayer.

We sat in our beds and he stood waiting by the embers to hear his fate, while nothing made a sound but Broke Axle.

"Why not?" I said. "We were

talking a ways back of taking on a third man."

"A man, said Scipio. "Yes."

"I can cook, I can pack. I can cook good bread, and I can show you sheep, and if I don't you won't have to pay me a cent," stated the boy.

"He sure means what he says," Scipio commented. "It's your trip.

Thus it was I came to hire Timberline.

Dawn showed him in the same miserable rags he wore on my first sight of him at the corral, and these proved his sole visible property of any kind; he didn't possess a change of anything, he hadn't brought away from Rongis so much as a handkerchief tied up with things inside it. Most wonderful of all, he owned not even a horse—and in that country in those days five dollars' worth of horse was within the means of almost anybody.

But he was unclean, as I had feared. He washed his one set of rags, and his skin-and-bones body, by the light of that first sunrise on Broke Axle, and this proved a habit with him, which made all the more strange his neglect to throw the rags away and wear the new clothes I bought as we passed through Lander, and gave him.

"Timberline," said Scipio the next day, "If Anthony Comstock came up in this country he'd jail you."

"Who's he?" Timberline screamed sharply.

"He lives in Noo York and he's agin the nood. That costume of yours is getting close on to what they claim Venus and other Greek statuary used to wear."

After this Timberline put on the Lander clothes, but we found that he kept the rags next his skin. This clinging to such worthless things seemed probably the result of destitution, of having had nothing, day after day and month after month.

His help in camp was real, not merely well meant; the curious haze or blur in which his mind had seemed to be at the corral cleared away, and he was worth his wages. What he had said he could do he did, and more. And yet, when I looked at him he was, somehow forever pitiful.

"Do you think anything is the matter with him?" I asked Scipio.

"Only just one thing. He'd oughtn't never have been born."

We continued along the trail, engrossed in our several thoughts, and I could hear Timberline, behind us with the pack-horses, singing: *"If that I was where I would be, Then should I be where I am not."*

OUR MODE of travel had changed at Fort Washakie: we had left the wagon and put ourselves and our baggage upon horses because we should presently be in a country where wagons could not go.

Once the vigorous words of some by-passer on a horse caused Scipio and me to discuss dropping the Washakie Needles for the country at

the head of Green River. None of us had ever been in the Green River country, while Timberline evidently knew the Washakie Needles well, and this decided us. But Timberline had been thrown into the strangest agitation by our uncertainty. He had said nothing, but he walked about, coming near, going away, sitting down, getting up, instead of placidly watching his fire and cooking; until at last I told him not to worry, that I should keep him and pay him in any case. Then he spoke:

"I didn't hire to go to Green River."

"What have you got against Green River?"

"I hired to go to the Washakie Needles."

His agitation left him immediately upon our turning our faces in that direction. What had so disturbed him we could not guess; but, later that day, Scipio rode up to me, bursting with a solution. He had visited a freighter's camp, and the freighter, upon learning our destination, had said he supposed we were "after the reward."

It did not get through my head at once, but when Scipio reminded me of the yellow poster and the murder, it got through fast enough; the body had been found on Owl Creek, and the middle fork of Owl Creek headed among the Washakie Needles. There might be another body—the other Eastern man who had never been seen since—and there was a possible third, the confederate, the cook;

many held it was the murderer's best policy to destroy him as well.

So now we had Timberline accounted for satisfactorily to ourselves: he was "after the reward." We never said this to him, but we worked out his steps from the start. As stock-tender at Rongis he had seen that yellow poster pasted up, and had read it, day after day, with its promise of what to him was a fortune. My sheep hunt had dropped like a Providence into his hand.

We got across the hot country where rattlesnakes were thick, where neither man lived nor water ran, and came to the first lone habitation in this new part of the world—a new set of mountains, a new set of creeks. A

man stood at the door, watching us come.

"Do you know him?" I asked Scipio.

"Well, I've heard of him," said Scipio. "He went and married a squaw."

We were now opposite the man's door. "You folks after the reward?" said he.

"After mountain sheep," I replied, somewhat angry.

We camped some ten miles beyond him, and the next day crossed a not high range, stopping near another cabin for noon. Two men were living here, cutting hay in a wild park. They gave us a quantity of berries they had picked, and we gave them some potatoes.

"After the reward?" said one of them as we rode away, and I contradicted him with temper.

"Lie to 'em," said Scipio. "Say yes."

Something had begun to weigh upon our cheerfulness in this new country. The reward dogged us, and we met strange actions of people, twice. We came upon some hot sulphur springs and camped near them, with a wide creek between us and another camp. Those people—two men and two women—emerged from their tent, surveyed us, nodded to us, and settled down again.

Next morning they had vanished; we could see empty bottles where thay had been. And once, coming out of a little valley, we sighted close to us through cottonwoods a horseman leading a pack-horse coming out of the next little valley. He did not nod to us, but pursued his parallel course some three hundred yards off, until a rise in the ground hid him for a while; when this was passed he was no longer where he should have been, abreast of us, but far to the front, galloping away. That was our last sight of him.

We spoke of these actions a little. Did these people suspect us, or were they afraid we suspected them? All we ever knew was that suspicion now closed down upon all things like a change of climate.

I DROVE UP the narrowing canyon of Owl Creek, a constant prey to such ill-ease, such distaste for continuing my sheep-hunt here, that shame alone prevented my giving it up and getting into another country out of sight and far away from these Washakie Needles, these twin spires of naked rock that rose in front of us now, high above the clustered mountain-tops, closing the canyon in, shutting the setting sun away.

"He *can* talk when he wants to." This was Scipio, riding behind me.

"What has Timberline been telling you?"

"Nothing. But he's telling himself a heap of something." In the rear of our single-file party Timberline rode, and I could hear him. It was a relief to have a practical trouble threatening us; if the boy was going off his head we should have something real to deal with. But

when I had chosen a camp and we were unsaddling and throwing the packs on the ground, Timberline was in his customary silence.

Next morning, the three of us left camp. It was warm summer in the valley by the streaming channel of our creek, and the quiet days smelled of the pines. By three o'clock we stood upon a lofty, wet, slippery ledge that fell away on three sides, sheer or broken, to the summer and the warmth thousands of feet below. Here it began to be very cold, and to the west the sky now clotted into advancing lumps of thick thunder-cloud, black, weaving and merging heavily and swiftly in a fierce rising wind.

We got away from this promontory to follow a sheep trail, and as we went along the backbone of the mountain, two or three valleys off to the right long black streamers let down from the cloud. They hung and wavered mistily close over the pines that did not grow within a thousand feet of our high level. I gazed hard at the streamers and discerned water, or something pouring down in them. Above our heads the day was still serene, and we had a chance to make camp without a wetting.

"No! no!" said Timberline hoarsely. "See there! We can get them. We're above them. They don't see us."

I saw no sheep where he pointed but he insisted they had merely moved behind a point, and so we went on to a junction of the knife-ridges upon which a second storm was hastening from the southwest over deep valleys that we turned our backs on to creep near the Great Washakie Needle.

Below us there was a new valley like the bottom of a caldron; on the far side of the caldron the air, like a stroke of magic became thick white, and through it leaped the first lightning, a blinding violet. A sheet of the storm crossed over to us, the caldron sank from sight in its white sea, and the hail cut my face, so I bowed it down. On the ground I saw what looked like a tangle of old footprints in the hard-crusted mud.

These the pellets of the swarming hail soon filled. This tempest of flying ice struck my body, my horse, raced over the ground like spray on the crest of breaking waves, and drove me to dismount and sit under the horse, huddled together even as he was huddled against the fury and the biting pain of the hail.

From under the horse's belly I looked out upon a chaos of shooting, hissing white, through which, in every direction, lightning flashed and leaped, while the fearful crashes behind the curtain of the hail sounded as if I should see a destroyed world when the curtain lifted. The place was so flooded with electricity that I gave up the shelter of my horse, and left my rifle on the ground, and moved away from the vicinity of these points of attraction.

At length the hailstones fell more

gently, the near view opened, revealing white winter on all save the steep, gray Needles; the thick white curtain of hail departed slowly, the hail where I was fell more scantily still.

Something somewhere near my head set up a delicate sound. It seemed in my hat. I rose and began to wander, bewildered by this. The hail was now falling very fine and gentle, where suddenly I was aware of its stinging me behind my ear more sharply than it had done before. I turned my face in its direction and found its blows harmless, while the stinging in my ear grew sharper. The hissing continued close to my head wherever I walked. It resembled the little watery escape of gas from a charged bottle whose cork is being slowly drawn.

I was now more really disturbed than I had been during the storm's worst, and meeting Scipio, who was also wandering, I asked if he felt anything. He nodded uneasily, when, suddenly—I know not why—I snatched my hat off. The hissing was in the brim, and it died out as I looked at the leather binding and the stitches.

I expected to see some insect there, or some visible reason for the noise. I saw nothing, but the pricking behind my ear had also stopped. Then I knew my wet hat had been charged like a Leyden jar with electricity. Scipio, who had watched me, jerked his hat off also.

"Lights on steer horns are nothing to this," I began, when he cut me short with an exclamation.

Timberline, on his knees, with a frightful countenance, was tearing off his clothes. He had felt the prickling, but it caused him thought different from mine.

"Leave me go!" he screamed. "I didn't push you over! He make me push you. I never knowed his game. I was only the cook. I wish't I'd followed you. There! There! Take it back! There's your money! I never spent a cent of it!"

And from those rags he had cherished he tore the bills that had been sewed in them. But this confession seemed not to stop the stinging. He rose, stared wildly, and, screaming wildly, "You've got it all" plunged into the caldron from our sight. The fluttered money—some of the victim's, hush-money hapless Timberline had accepted from the murderer—was only five ten-dollar bills; but it had been enough load of guilt to draw him to the spot of the crime.

We found the two bodies, the old and the new, and buried them both. But the true murderer was not caught, and no one ever claimed the reward.

PAWNEE!

Morgan prowled among the burnt-out wagons and twisted bodies. He had one final job—stir up the Indians to blood madness!

by GIL BREWER

FIVE DAYS beyond the Missouri, trouble began to rain down on the Graufeld-Carney-Handrahan train of twenty-one covered wagons, and Angus Graufeld loudly blamed the slow-talking trail guide he had been forced to hire in Independence.

At noon this fifth day, they made camp on sun-checkered clay beside a trickle of water in the middle of a broad stream bed. This was the "fine, flowing river" the guide, Cliff Morgan, had promised. Ahead of them lay rolling, sun-lacquered hills, threatening airless emptiness and perhaps even Indians, though only this morning Morgan briefly stated that they were not yet driving on the true Nebraskan prairie flatlands.

Angus Graufeld raged at Morgan. "A fine river, this, an' two axles busted!" He lumbered stolidly toward the guide red hair curling from beneath the brim of a broken black hat, his face dour above lumpy, blue-shirted shoulders.

Morgan slid to the ground, Indian fashion, light on moccasined feet. Tall, slim, he looked hickory-hard under the brown flannel shirt and sun-paled jeans, the whites of his eyes and his teeth very white against cedar-brown skin.

These folk were farmers from as far east as New York, heading for the promise of Oregon's black soil, and Angus Graufeld had insisted they did not need a guide, though not one could shoot a buffalo, much less skin it out.

He walked away from Graufeld and finally paused by a wagon. For a moment he stood there, listening to the savage humming from beneath the canvas. Angus Graufeld's bees and hives; two heavily loaded wagons of them, with their honey for food and their queen to keep them happy so they wouldn't wander from home.

Occasionally a vicious, wildly balling swarm shot out over the tailgate, exploded straight up into the sunlight, circled, then buzzed straight back to their queen. Graufeld had kept bees all his life and he insisted he would carry these to Oregon.

Graufeld caught up with him.

"How come you turned the oxen out?" Morgan asked. "There's six miles yet between here an' dusk."

"We'll be all afternoon takin' on water," Angus Graufeld said.

"What's the idee? You promised us water at noon and water at night. I'm tellin' you flat out, Morgan–I don't take to the likes of you." Graufeld panted slightly, squinting against the sun. "Flat out," he said.

Morgan carefully took his hat off. He ran his finger around the inside of the sweat-band, flicked his finger at the baked earth.

"Been a hot dry summer," he told Graufeld. "Reckon it'll be drier, out there. What folks call a drought. Likely be some water in the streams, though."

"Two axles busted!"

"Better axles than legs," Morgan said.

"My brother, Matt, he's got a two-day start on us," Graufeld said. "An' he ain't got no fool guide, neither. Is he takin' the same trail we are?"

"Seems to be," Morgan said quietly. "Signs of his train this mornin' when I was out scouting. They lost a wagon yonder. Looks like they mebbe killed an ox, too. Mebbe fed it to the dogs. Mebbe they et it theirselves."

Graufeld ignored this. "Matt said he didn't need no danged guide. Wouldn't have one."

"Your brother a redhead, too?"

Graufeld nodded, started to speak again. But Morgan had had enough. When he turned away, there was abrupt finality in his movement.

Morgan managed to avoid Angus Graufeld the rest of the day.

He hoped the man would stay in line from tomorrow morning on, because they were edging Indian country now.

After supper, with the fires guttering, Morgan excused himself from Indian discussion with three young boys, moved quietly out from the circle of wagons and crossed the hard river bed to the bank. He climbed the bank, lounged in the dust-dry grass, where he had a view of the area. He sat smoking and thinking. The train looked peaceful, the fires still pulsing redly amid high dark shadow, men, women and wagons like cut-outs from black paper.

Lifting his gaze westward, he swallowed dryly, thumbed his cigarette out in the dusty earth. He saw the figure, then, moving toward him from the wagons and knew it to be a woman, and then knew which woman. He forced himself to wait.

"A word with you, Mr. Morgan," she said. "I don't consider it proper that I should take care of your things the way you've been having me do," she said stiffly. "I came to tell you. Your rifle, your pack, those dusty bed-roll blankets–I won't have it."

"You sure do look pretty this evening, Miss Graufeld," Morgan said. "Some of that fire get into your hair?" He cleared his throat mildly,

and this time his hat came off and he stood there, curling the brim in his hands. "Be fine if I could call you Zerelda—an' I don't much take to this Mister business, neither. Name's Cliff, you know?"

She turned half away, the long gingham dress that she wore each evening swirling against the grass. "I'm sorry," she said. "I've been horrid. I may as well be truthful—it's my father. He's warned me to stay away from you. He says the only reason you're here is because of me."

He felt sudden warmth in his shoulders and throat, as she snapped a quick glance at him, turned to start down the bank. He sensed her embarrassment, took her arm.

"Zerelda," he said. "Wait. Please, don't go."

"If he sees me talking with you, he'll be a sight more than just angry. I'd best go, truly. I know he's wrong, but he's my father."

He let go her arm and she stood by the edge of the bank, her back to him. "Where are you from, Mr. Morgan? I mean, where's your home?"

"Oregon—where we're goin'. Got a right nice piece of land on the river." He paused, then said, "Reckon you'd like it, too. Rich, green country—fine, big trees and cool, clean air. Air like you never breathed back east. There's a two-room cabin, I built—right cozy." Now a small tension formed inside him, he wondered if he'd said too much.

Her voice was cool. "Really? Whatever possessed you to come away out here, guiding a wagon train?" She watched him levelly, her arms stiff along her sides.

"I come hunting for the right woman to carry back to that cabin," he said simply.

For a moment she seemed unaware of his words.

He added gently, "I found her in a place called Independence. She was headin' west, you see?"

Her voice chilled like skim ice from the morning wash pail. "Father was right! He told me you were no good—and I—"

She turned sharply, stumbling down the bank, then she was running now, hurrying across the river bed

toward the circle of wagons, and a part of him chipped off and went with her. He had said too much, now the chance was gone.

Days later they were well into the soul-breaking flatlands, creaking westward in slow hot welters of dust and high tempers. Clouds of dust embraced the train like huge dirty bladders and you could not escape; you blinked it, sweated it, ate it in your food as seasoning, and breathed it eternally. Life became a tired procession of windless days, and the heat roasted in the earth, and even early morning dew did not lay the dust if you rolled heavily in your blankets.

He attemped speaking to her, but she avoided him determinedly, under Angus Graufeld's eyes. Yet something new stirred, Morgan began to feel it, see it. If he could get the wagons to Fort Laramie, he felt everything would be fine. But Fort Laramie was a long way yet, and they weren't on the Platte. The men and women were not so cheerful now; they clotted in head-craned, secretive groups away from him in the evenings; the children no longer sought him out for tales of "Injuns and wild beasts."

Carney and Handrahan, two last straws, silently deserted his side. He suspected what was brewing, hoped he was wrong, and waited it out.

It came fast and final endless brutal days from the river bed camp, in blinding, arid noon, and Morgan was helplessly afraid for them all.

Returned from scouting to the northwest, with Pawnee sign on his mind, he sensed something when Angus Graufeld called to him from beside the lead wagon. The train was strung out for nearly a mile, halted. Al Carney and Tom Handrahan—the co-leaders who had invited Graufeld in Independence and insisted on hiring a guide—backed Graufeld up as he strode over to Morgan.

"We got news for you," Graufeld said. He had sprouted a heavy rust-colored beard now, and his impatient eyes were webbed with fatigue. Carney and Handrahan scuffed dust, searched the ground in front of them, looked off across the plains.

"Yes?" He dismounted for the sake of Graufeld's temper.

"We been makin' up our minds," Graufeld said. "Ain't we, Tom—Al?" He wheeled, looked at them, turned back to Morgan.

Carney and Handrahan nodded soberly. Carney found his pipe, began scraping the cake with his knife.

"Well?"

Graufeld's voice was bold. "Five days back my brother Matt left this trail," he said. "Matt's makin' his own trail now."

Morgan sighed. "Didn't reckon you'd notice that."

"Youd don't reckon on a lot of things, Morgan," Graufeld said with satisfaction. "You're through, hear? Fired. We don't want you no more—that clear?"

Morgan watched the man,

thinking, *You blind, stumbling, stubborn, pap-wet, idiotic, childish fool!*

"We're breaking a new trail," Graufeld said. "My trail. We're not stopping at Fort Laramie. We got plenty stuff to carry us, an' we ain't gettin' caught by Indians, an we ain't going to get caught with all the land gone oncet we get to Oregon, neither. Matt done it, we're doin' it. We taken a vote. You're through as guide of this here now train. We're payin' you off."

Graufeld flipped a small chamois purse from his pocket, handed it to Morgan. "It's gold, an' we say goodby to you."

"Wait," Morgan said. He stood watching Graufeld, the purse chinking in his hand. "You figure you know what you're gettin' into?"

"We don't want to know from you. We seen you an' the way you act. We want to get to our land, see? We're plumb sick of this Indian talk, an' 'don't hurry it,' an' 'take your time.' You heard me, that's it. We're cuttin' trail to where Matt headed an' we'll likely catch 'im 'fore he gets far."

"I reckon you likely will," Morgan said. He wanted to tell them about others who had tried this, decided against it. He thought of Zerelda, the women and children, the men who had been swept up and snarled in Graufeld's selfishly planned foray against him. It was too late to alter this now.

"All right," he said. "I'll just ride along with you, then." He turned toward his bay, pocketing the purse.

"No, you don't!" Graufeld said. "We voted that, too. I don't want you hankerin' after my daughter. I'm sick to death of seein' you moon—"

Morgan came in front of Graufeld smoothly, fast. Carney and Handrahan seemed provoked to sudden indecision. Morgan's voice was soft. "I ain't your trail guide now, remember?" He did not move now, he only watched the man. "Any more from you about Miss Zerelda, an' you'll have me on your hands. I might clean forget you're her Pa."

"Take provisions an' leave this train!" Graufeld ordered, his face darkening. "You've cost us time an' worry to boot. We don't want you. Ever'body sees it my way. We took the vote, Morgan." He turned, shoving at Carney and Handrahan.

Morgan knew he must speak to the other men.

"Tom," he said. "I reckon you better listen. This old buzzard's got you both mewlin' like a basket of kittens." He ceased then. The three were striding back toward the lead wagon, unheeding. Graufeld's back was very stiff, his dust-caked hat rigidly square on curling red hair.

Morgan turned to his horse, swung astride. "Well," he said. "Well, I reckon. Well, well."

Walking the bay past the third wagon, he glanced over at Zerelda, in jacket and pants, her carrot-colored hair washing brightly to her shoulders. She leaned against a wheel, looked up at him as rode by.

"I'm not sure what I want to say," she said.

"Don't say nothing, then," he told her, reining in. "An' take good care of my pack an' my buffalo gun."

"What? Here, Mr. Morgan—wait!" But he had turned and was riding at a fast gallop along the length of the train. The tone of her voice struck deep into him and he held it there, liking it.

He stopped at several wagons and always asked the same question: "How're your hubs? Plenty of grease?" And received the same answer: "Our grease is on the utility wagon." He knew it was, he was only checking. He was taking no chances. Too many lives depended on him moving slowly and carefully. Most of the folks were in a confab with Graufeld, over by a copse of sunny cottonwoods. The train was a beautiful target for a raiding party.

Two hours later he rested his horse on a slight rise of ground some three miles from the still motionless train. He searched the clear brassy of the sky for a cloud, found none. Good. Rain would be fatal. Wheeling the bay, he set off due north for a ridge of hills, sparsely wooded, and blue-gold with distance. Once there, he let his horse graze, and waited. Along toward twilight the wagons approached, missed obvious terrain that promised water, circled in the slanting shade of the only timber within miles, and Morgan knew Graufeld was perhaps unconsciously satisfying a desire to defy all he had warned him about.

Morgan lay flat on the dry grass of the hill and picked out the utility wagon, studying its driver, one Timothy Saltonstall. Saltonstall was, even at this distance, interested in a girl from wagon eleven and Morgan pleasurably recalled seeing the man bed down near number eleven every night. Still, he waited, checking it out all the way.

It was after midnight, with the moon paper-white, when he heard the single muted echo of unshod hoofs. He mounted the bay, rode down a narrow dry wash and twenty minutes later lay on his chest in deep dusty grass not twenty-five yards from a lone Pawnee warrior astride a black pony, within clear sight of the wagon circle and its six fires.

The Pawnee was a scout, alone, far from home, Morgan knew, as he watched the Indian ride off to the north at an easy gallop. He returned to the first hill and bedded down for the night. He had to wait until the wagons circled on an incline before he could act.

Two nights later he got his chance, and he had seen no further sign of Indians. This was not good news. It was hotter, drier than ever, but the wagons circled for camp on a gentle slope below which wound a narrow sunken stream. They would ford the stream in the morning, Morgan hoped, toward eventual safety.

An hour after midnight, he

crouched beside the utility wagon, ready for labor. One loud noise and he was done. Timothy Saltonstall would be caught napping by wagon eleven and watched to bed every night hereafter. He might, himself, be seen.

The kegs of axle grease were heavy. One at a time, holding his breath, he bucked them on his shoulders from the quietly complaining wagon bed, and rolled them down the slope. It was hot work. He stripped off his brown flannel shirt, tossed it inside the wagon, kept plugging. Twice he sprawled flat beneath the wagon as a sleepy guard prowled by. Done with the kegs, he found canvas water buckets among unused new stores, filled them with dirt, and reestablished proper weight in the wagon. He covered the buckets with some planks which had shielded the grease, then stumbled tiredly down the slope and slumped among the scattered kegs, praying nobody would come to the stream.

Calling on waning energy, he rescued the kegs, buried them where they lay, buried the shovel stolen from the wagon. Two kegs had rolled into the stream and he had to dive for them because the wagons would cross here in the morning. Then he remembered his shirt.

He started toward the wagon, then ducked flat on the ground. A guard leaned against a rear wheel smoking. Morgan breathed slowly, waiting. Then he stiffened as the guard sat down with his back against the wheel. Dawn was paling the eastern sky, so it was too bad about the shirt.

With morning, he watched the wagons lumber and rattle and pitch over their precious, hidden grease, splash through hub-deep water, and creak resonantly on into the driest, roughest country they yet had seen. Far beyond lay mountains. They were heading straight into Indian land in an effort to cross brother Matt Graufeld's trail. Because Morgan knew this country, he could sleep until noon. Rising, he rode hard and passed the wagons at good distance, listening. No particularly strident curses from crying hubs reached him as yet.

In two days, things were different. By mid-morning he could hear weird shriekings and rusty metallic howls. Men scurried with lard pails. He knew their lard was meagre now, would last only a few hours. Rejoicing in this, but suffering from bad sunburn without a shirt, he rode west, located the well-watered stream he expected, thankful it had not gone dry. He then turned north and rode until the moon was full high and bright enough to read by.

He crossed Matt Graufeld's wagon trail. He knew it was a train of sixteen wagons and he counted on two more days' travel to catch up. The sudden find in a shallow moonlit valley surprised him. It also shocked and sickened him; and, after waiting for signs of life, he rode cautiously in among the burned and blackened

skeletons of wagons and equipment, viewing with slow horror the grotesque positions of slain, bare-skulled men, the crumpled bodies of women and children. The oxen and mules had been killed, but a single bloated horse proved the Indians had taken all other stock. Numbers of dead Indians told him a burial party would return, but that he was perhaps watched did not trouble him. In his mind's eye he had visioned all of this and he felt sadly bitter.

Riding from the silent valley, he took the Indians' trail and after five hours, came upon a small war party, resting nervously beside two tight fires. There were eleven Pawnees, under a shelf of rock beside a creek. He knew the main war party must have returned to the tribe for more recruits. Time was running out, for those redskins would be blood-angry at the loss of so many braves.

He rode back through the valley of unburied dead, performed a hateful but needed task, searched and found more than he could have hoped for, and turned south toward a memory of Zerelda and countless helpless folk who were rolling straight to certain death unless his plans worked.

He rode with a prayer in his heart that bedded uncomfortably close to hatred and dark hope. Within two miles of the wagon train, he heard the hellish shrieks of ungreased hubs. In sight of the train, he paused, watching.

Oxen were strangling themselves in their yokes, under lashing bull whips. Teamsters fought, raged and yelled. The squealing, squawking, squeaking, ear-gritting din was demoniac. He realized the train had moved only a little over a mile since yesterday. It was late afternoon. He knew they were done. He saw them make one more valiant try. The wheels were frozen. The Graufeld-Carney-Handrahan wagon train was stranded high and dry, without water, beneath a white-hot sun and he knew those hubs were smoking.

When he first conceived this plan, he had reckoned on letting them toast a while. Now he rode for them, heeling the bay hard, a picture of what lay northward in the shallow valley bright and terrifying in his mind.

Men streamed for him, yelling, on a dead run the moment they saw him. He drew rein by the lead wagon. Angus Graufeld rushed toward him, shouting, a rifle muzzle steady before he could dismount.

"Come down, you thief!" Graufeld said harshly.

Women and children tagged the mobbing men. Morgan saw Zerelda silently watching, her face caked with dust, her eyes round and tiredly accusing. Graufeld's voice was confused, desperate.

"We'll die, you hear? We found your shirt, we know you done it! Thief—spiteful son!" Then he lost control, the rifle swung, the barrel cracked against Morgan's left leg. The bay bucked high. Shouts and yells

came from the men and they swarmed upon him. He fought at grasping hands, trying to reach behind his back to his belt. He was flung from the horse, smashed against the ground.

"Where is it?" Graufeld said.

"Why don't we settle with 'im!"

"Don't be fools," Morgan said, trying to rise.

"Who's the fool?" a man screamed. "String 'im up!"

Brutal hands raked across the tender, sunburnt flesh of his bare back. He was jerked to his feet amid shouts and curses. He whirled, trying to speak. Somebody laughed crazily and he went spinning across the center of a group of men into rock-hard fists that beat and slashed at his face, his body. He was kicked, smashed to the ground, hauled to his feet and slammed down again.

"How about a whip!" another man shouted. "Put 'im in a yoke—we'll see mebbe *he* can pull a wagon!"

A woman screamed then. "Indians!"

The cry sounded and suddenly he lay there on the ground, alone. Everybody rushed for the wagons. He came to one knee, stood, his head throbbing with pain.

He counted eleven red men riding toward them and knew they were the warriors he had seen the night before. They had trailed him after discovering that this lone white man had scalped their dead, and further desecrated them by stringing the scalps on a rope between two charred wagons at the valley massacre. He had flaunted failure in their faces.

Morgan turned, hunting for Angus Graufeld. He located him hurriedly loading his rifle, shouting instructions to other wagoneers. Already, women and children were out of sight in wagon beds.

"Listen," Morgan siad. "An' don't argue."

Angus Graufeld stared at him, the rifle barrel jerked up.

"You listen," Graufeld said bitterly.

Morgan lunged, struck the gun from the man's hands. He slammed him back against the side of a wagon box.

"There's eleven Pawnee comin',"

he said softly. "We got to kill every blessed one, hear?" He told him why, speaking softly, holding Graufeld tight up against the wagon box. "If one of those braves gets loose so he can make it to his tribe, we're done. Mebbe we're done anyways."

He released Graufeld, moved toward the other men. The Indians were nearing, clouds of dust scattering in puffs from their running ponies. Already they were yelling, crying. Morgan called quick explanations and the men listened now because they knew whatever he had done, he was still their authority in this country.

"We ain't got time to circle, even if we could," he told them. "Every man count off an' pick a redskin. An' remember," he said. "There's got to be eleven dead Indians, or this train will never reach Oregon." He waited, watching them. "They'd wait to fight till morning, but they're bloodcrazy 'cause of something that happened they don't exactly like."

He quit them, returned to Graufeld.

"Just stay clear of me till this is done," Graufeld said.

"Yes," Morgan said. He reached behind his back then, to his belt, unhooked the red-haired, blood-encrusted scalp and dropped it at Angus Graufeld's feet. "A Pawnee brave had this in his hand when he died," Morgan said.

"That's like I found it." He watched the slow drop of the rifle barrel in Graufeld's hands, frowning as the rifle clattered to the hot earth. "I'm sorry," Morgan said quietly.

Rifles commenced to bark and abruptly the Pawnees rode down the line of wagons, rushing, firing blindly, whooping behind warpaint as they clattered past. In their eagerness, they were careless. Morgan saw two warriors sprawl from their ponies. Another clung, wounded, to his pony's black mane, and was dragged till he dropped.

Beneath number four wagon now, with Graufeld, he explained how his brother Matt had died. He told why he had done what he had with the kegs of grease. "There was no other way," he said. "Headin' north, you were pushing into sure-fire Indian territory. The Pawnee won't stand for it right now. You'd already been watched a few nights back. You'd of been in the same mess as your brother. Had to stop you, somehow, an' this was the only way I knew.

"We get every one of these Indians, we got a slim chance of gettin' away from here into safer country. More damned Pawnee will be along in a couple days. But if we make a stream I know of to the west, we'll send a cart back for the grease and start south before dark. They've tasted blood, we ain't got much time."

Graufeld stared at him. "The wheels are frozen," he said.

"C'mon," Morgan said. "Let's get a hand in this."

Two Pawnees on horseback hit the ground as Morgan stepped out,

drawing his revolver. Spurts of smoke flowered from beneath wagons all along the line and the bark and crack of rifle and revolver rang below the war cries of the Pawnee. Graufeld flung himself to the ground, sighted his rifle on a galloping Indian, fired, missed. The redskin saw him trying to reload, turned his pony at full run headlong toward Morgan. The Indian hurled himself screaming through the air.

Morgan fired from one knee, caught him in the leg. The Pawnee sprawled on him, fighting like a wildcat and Morgan saw the gleaming knife, the savage yellow eyes. Suddenly the man went lax, fell head down. Graufeld stood there with a long knife in his hand, staring. Morgan knew it was the man's first kill. It would be that way with all the men in this train, and this was fierce new country for them.

Morgan stood up. Frightened ponies were scattered riderless for a half mile around the train. The rifles ceased barking and a long shout went up, breaking loud against the hot and windless air.

Morgan thought of Zerelda, took a stop toward the front of the train. He saw Graufeld drop the knife, still staring. Then Graufeld came over to him.

"We can't move," he said. "You know that." He strode purposefully from Morgan's side, returned with a shovel from the lead wagon and buried what remained of his brother Matt who had not wanted a trail guide. He felt no need for one.

Men and women began to filter toward the lead wagon, the men still carrying hot long-rifles in their hands, some with puzzled eyes. Graufeld put the shovel away, and came over to Morgan again.

"There's a way," Morgan said now. "I figured on a way. Would I do this and not have a way?"

Graufeld stared at him, then out across the land, his gaze jerking from spot to spot on the nearby sunburnt grass, where the eleven Pawnee warriors lay. "Any casualties?" he called.

Somebody shouted, "Crockett's lost a finger. Tim Saltonstall got it pretty bad – busted collarbone. An' Lewellen caught a ball in his side."

Morgan turned. "That all?" he said.

"Nobody else hurt."

Morgan reached out, steered Graufeld away toward the wagons and they stood beside the one he wanted. He reached up and smashed the canvas and a swarm of bees exploded over the tailgate, screamed upward into the sun. In a moment, they returned to their hives.

"There's your answer," Morgan said. "Honey – wax. It'll take us as far as we have to go, if we're careful. Think it'll work?"

Graufeld's mouth opened, closed.

"Now you take care of them ornery bees," Morgan said. "Get the men an' some ladles. There's plenty of work, an' it's got to be fast."

Graufeld turned without a word,

gave a sudden whoop, abruptly ran down the train toward the men, shouting the news.

Morgan sighed. He did not smile. He turned, moved over toward the tailgate of another Graufeld rig he had in mind. He came around and stood there. He took his hat off and looked up at her, knowing the need to speak.

"Yes," she said. "I heard. When those Indians came, I couldn't find you. Your pack and gun are safe."

She paused, swung down beside him. They looked at each other for a time without moving or speaking, and her carrot-colored hair took fire from the sun.

"By dark tonight we'll be headed for the Platte an' Fort Laramie."

"Maybe when we get to the river, you'll let me wash your blankets?"

"I reckon so." he said. He grinned, stepped over to her and took her in his arms and just stood there like that, staring across her shoulder into her father's eyes, where he had stopped by the wagon.

Angus Graufeld's face was like the earth, grave and unreadable. But even earth changes. Abruptly he whooped at his men and ran lumbering off toward the bee wagons.

In less than an hour, the Graufeld-Carney-Handrahan train of twenty-one covered wagons turned westward from the sun-baked slope where eleven dead Pawnee warriors lay, and with well-honeyed wheel-hubs rolled normally on toward its destiny.

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GUN SMART

by

C. HALL THOMPSON

A man walks taller with a gun—but when it lets him down . . . is he still a man?

VIRGIL FELT the grease of sweat on his palms. The hair pulled tight at the back of his neck. He hitched straighter in the saddle, in the red dusk above Cardova. He watched the others.

The four men looked like riders heading in for a big night at the saloon. Clell chewed the stub of a cigarette—his full lips bent a smile on the town below. Harker and Jack were thin and expressionless. Under their long linen dusters, the Winchesters did not bulge. Jesse lifted his Colt and checked the load. He slid the gun back into leather.

Be like him, Virgil thought, cold and sure, like Jesse.

Clell said, "Scared, kid?" through that smile.

"Let him alone." Jesse said.

"Let me alone," Virgil said. "I'm all right."

Clell laughed. "He's tighter'n a rusty spring."

Harker and Jack laughed. Virgil felt his neck get hot. Jesse's lips thinned under the dark mustache.

"The kid's all right."

"I don't know about that," Clell said.

Jack said, "Maybe we shoulda left

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him back at the camp. We don't want no mistakes."

Jesse looked at Virgil steadily. "There won't be no mistakes. Will there, kid?"

"No."

"You'll remember your brother. It was a bank dick killed him. You'll remember that."

Virgil said, "I'll remember."

"It's a perfectly simple job."

Virgil frowned. "That cashier. He won't take it lying down."

Jesse touched the gun. "He'll take it. Because of this. That's all you got to know. The gun makes 'em lie down. And he'll know it."

Harker said, "We're wasting time."

Jesse nodded.

They put down the hill trail through the stunted pinons and along the falling spur. They didn't talk any more. On the flats, they split. Harker and Jack swung east and circled into the low-sprawled buildings of the town. Clell went in from the west. For ten minutes, Jesse and the kid waited.

Then Jesse said, "This is it."

They didn't ride fast. Their shadows were tall and restless in the dust before them. Virgil felt of the cool bone of the gunbutt. *This is what does it. You got this and you're more than yourself, bigger. . . .* The way his brother had been. The way Jesse said he was.

Virgil saw the squat hunch of Clell on a barrel outside Holwell's General Store, close to his horse, patiently whittling at a willow twig. Upstreet, Harker lounged under the arcade of a saloon and Jack's blue roan was halted almost before the bank, the rider dismounted to tighten the cinch buckles. They covered the bank entrance from all angles.

Jesse pulled up Union Alley. Virgil followed. They left the ponies outside the rear exit of the bank and walked back to Division Street.

The bank smelled of old ledgers and ink. There was a desk with a placard that said: *JOB WALTHAL, PRESIDENT.* But the president had gone for the day. The cashier in the wire cage looked big and square. The celluloid collar was tight on his thick neck. He held his place in the ledger and smiled.

"Well, you're the gent was in yesterday to look over our little bank before you invested. You're Mister—"

"Miller," Jesse said.

Virgil felt the dryness of his mouth. He wished the clerk wouldn't smile so friendly-like.

The clerk said, "Come in to make another deposit, I reckon?"

"No," Jesse said. "A withdrawal, this time."

The smile went crooked. The big man in the cage stared at the leveled gun.

"You're married," Jesse said. "You don't want to leave a widow."

The cashier didn't move. Jesse nodded. "Inside, kid."

They swung through the knee-

high wicket. The room behind the cage was cramped and hot, with the door leading to Union Alley in the rear wall. The clerk kept turning to face Jesse's gun. The barrel jerked toward the iron-black vault.

"Open it."

Thick shoulders bunched under the nankeen vest, aching to fight back. In the stillness, the clerk said, "I can't."

Virgil saw the paling lips. "Easy, Jess."

The muzzle shoved into the cashier's belly. "You're a liar."

"There's a time lock," the clerk said. "Nobody can open it till eight in the morning."

Something happened to Jesse's face. He brought the gun up and down fast and Virgil heard the crack of jawbone. The clerk went to his knees. Virgil felt a numb sickness in his chest. He watched Jess wheel to the vault.

"He's lying. It'll open. It's got to—"

The clerk lunged. Jesse yelled and tried to spin and the Colt pulled up but there was no shot. Jesse swore at the jammed hammer and flung out. The gun slapped the cage-wire above the clerk's head. The wire sang shrilly. The big square man closed in.

Virgil stood there. He saw the flattening of Jesse's back against the iron door.

"Get him, kid! For God's sake—"

Virgil didn't fire. He stepped between them and swung in low, feeling the clerk double over his fist,

bringing the right up from the floor. The clerk twisted and lunged across a table. An inkspot spilled black across the ledgers. The big man lay still, arms dangling over the table edge, swaying idly.

Jesse was already at the back door.

"It's no good, now. All that noise'll bring them running. Got to clear out."

He flung through the exit and fumbled with reins and stirrup. Virgil stepped into the saddle on the run.

"The others," he said.

"The hell with—" Jesse caught it. He didn't look at the kid. "They'll know it went wrong. They'll meet us tomorrow at Larosa." He didn't wait to argue.

They pulled out through the tail end of the alley. Back on Division Street, in the lamplit night, shots racketed.

Virgil said, "Clell—the others—"

Jesse rode on as if he hadn't heard.

IF A POSSE lit out, it was after Harker and Jack and Clell. It didn't come near the first low reaches of the mountain, the pass where Jess and Virgil halted.

For a while, neither of them spoke. Jesse built a cigarette. His hands were all thumbs.

"It was the gun. That damn gun went back on me."

Virgil didn't answer. Jesse let out a quivering sigh of smoke.

"You could've got him," he said. "You were armed."

Quietly, Virgil said, "I got you out of there. Maybe I owed you that much—the way you kept me in grub the last months."

"What's that mean?"

"That much I owed you. No more."

The pass was quiet. Jesse tried a laugh.

Virgil said, "The gun made a man bigger, you told me. Added something to him. Only you were wrong, Jess. I saw that, back there, when you lost it. The gun wasn't something added. It was a *part* of you—something to make up for a piece of you that was missing. It was the only thing that made you even equal to other men. Without it, you were crippled, where you live."

"Fancy talk."

"Maybe. Or maybe something you know. A thing my brother never learned, but I did—before I was past learning." Virgil lifted the reins lightly. "I won't be seeing you, Jess."

"You're walking out."

"I'm walking out."

"You think I'll let you. You think I won't stop you—"

Quiet eyes rested on the empty holster at Jesse's hip. "No," Virgil said. "You won't stop me."

Jesse didn't.

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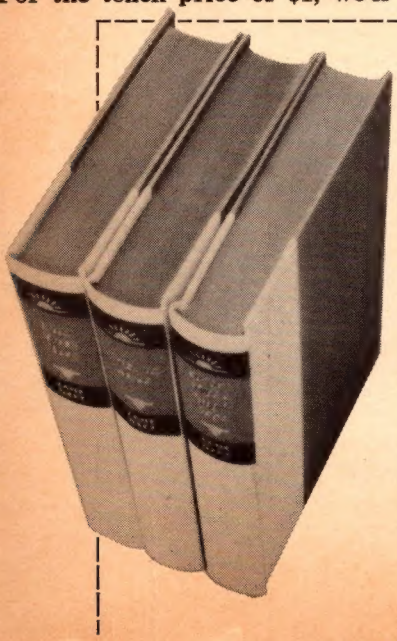

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